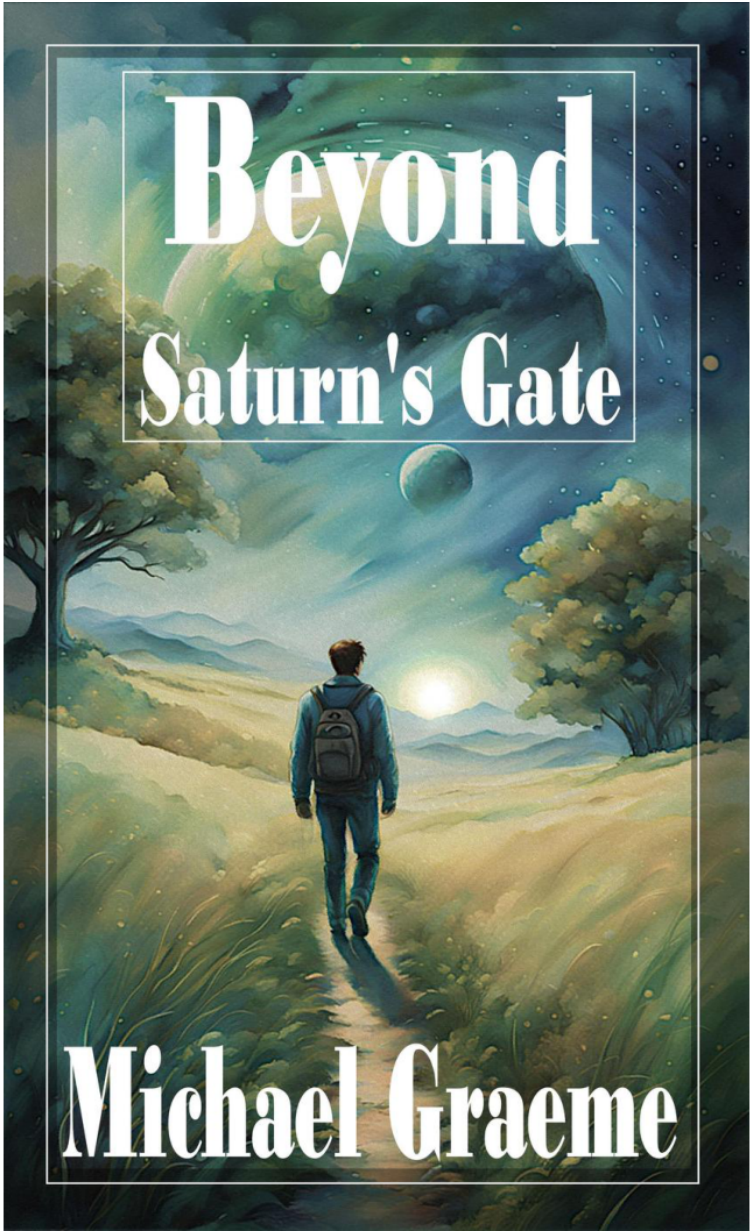


The background of the book cover is a detailed illustration. It depicts a person with reddish-brown hair, wearing a blue jacket and a backpack, walking away from the viewer along a dirt path. The path is flanked by tall grass and leads towards a bright, glowing sun or moon on the horizon. In the distance, there are rolling hills and mountains. The sky is a deep blue with stars and a large, pale, ringed planet (Saturn) in the upper left. A smaller, blue planet is visible in the upper right. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

Beyond Saturn's Gate

Michael Graeme

Beyond Saturn's Gate

by

Michael Graeme

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Epilogue

Beyond Saturn's Gate

Chapter One

I'm looking at this lakefront retail palace. Empty for years, it stands like a hollow sentinel on the waterfront, its reflection shattered into impasto shards. The water lends glamour back to the place, blurs out its embarrassment so it becomes like a memory of former times – proxy for a song of glad-times, boom times, of swinging doors and ringing tills – times when the very air seemed perfumed with the mystique of opulence.

When was that I wonder?

Yes, I know it was an illusion – no measure of the spirit, how the money flows. In a more vital sense, we were as bankrupt then as we are now. It's just that now we've lost the pretence of our fancy clothes. And all that remains is this hollowed-out palace, while over there, on the water, the swans dabble and the geese raise their young.

Curious.

I may write a poem about it, because that's what poets do. And if I must call myself anything these days, 'poet' is as good a label as any. Poet. Writer. But really, I'm a reinvention. Unlike this palace, I arrive in the end-times of the Western world, already changed. You're going to need to do that too. You need to forget who you were and work out who you're going to be in relation to what's coming next.

But don't worry - this isn't a polemic. I survived forty years in another life, claimed my pension and now I'm travelling light into my personal sunset. Meaning – that's what this is about. And why not? Sure, isn't 'meaning' the holy grail of every true born human being?

Or maybe instead you're one of those hoping this place will open again. But trust me, it's gone forever. Sad to say it's hard to see something coming when it happens slow - twenty years or more - and a dozen spin-doctors all promising you better times, and each of them more boastful than the last.

Yet nothing changes.

I don't blame you for being angry, for being scared, but you're looking for meaning in all the wrong places.

"You all right there, mate?"

Am I what? All right? Ah – security. I must be trespassing. There

used to be a way through here, back in the day. It was perhaps permissive then. Not now. He's old school – overweight, polite. The new breed will come at you face-masked and already shoving, ready with their zip-ties.

"Yes, I'm all right. Sorry. We used to be able to walk through this bit."

"Not any more. Sorry."

He's sorry. I'm sorry. It doesn't matter if we mean it - saying it helps. Remember that.

"It's a shame it's all closed down."

I don't know if it's a shame or not - I'll work that one out in a poem, later. But for now it seems a harmless thing to say, something conversational. He might respond. He might not.

"Have to ask you to leave."

Not.

That's fine. It wasn't this place that brought me back to the old town anyway. It was one of those other paths. A dream. A poem. A vision of a crowded coffee shop. Lots of things come to me in dreams these days, and the difference between the self I was, and the self I am now is,... I follow them.

I thought it might be the cafe I used to bring the kids on Saturdays. But that's gone, as is the old bookshop where I got most of my reading. Well, the bookshop's still there, stock intact. But the doors have been locked for years, books in the window display gradually yellowing in the sun. I'd thought it might be broken into, but thieves go after supermarkets now. It is simply food we hunger for. Not books, or ideas.

Anyway, I am escorted over the polished tiles of the piazza. There was a fountain here, if memory serves. So, no – none of this is coming back, and yet the ghost of it warrants guards. I suppose, in America, they would be armed and therefore my life in danger. Here all I stand to lose is a bit of dignity. It's puzzling, there's nothing here to steal, and even in its heyday, there was nothing I wanted from it anyway. I have only ever wanted time, and the fleet of foot to pursue every second.

And now, reinvented as I am, I come to bear witness, and to leave a trail of breadcrumbs.

Follow if it pleases you.

But for now let's find a cafe. Any old place will do. It's just that I feel that poem coming on - opening lines, and the rhythm of it, the

muse humming at the edge of perception. And the dream did speak of a poem, so I would not like to lose it.

Let me see,...

*Lakefront retail palace
empty now for years,
stands sentinel on the waterfront,
its reflection shaken
to impasto shards of memory,
proxy for a song of better times.
When was that, I wonder?
When did those doors last swing
and the tills ring? And when was the air
perfumed with the confidence
and mystique of opulence?
It was a fallacy, I know,
no measure of the spirit
how the money flows.
We were bankrupt then,
as now, it's just that now we've lost
the illusion of our fancy clothes.
There's just this lakefront retail palace
empty now for years,
and a few snatched bars of song,
once thinly sung, while out on the water
there, among those impasto shards,
swans dabble
and the geese raise their young.*

There. What do you think? Does that help clarify the run of my thoughts? Or am I just too obscure these days?

As for the poem, I might have submitted it once. There are still people who read poetry, and for the same reasons some of us write it. We are, of course, both in decline. You'd think I'd stand out, though, a lone man, writing longhand in a notebook, crowded cafe, hipster vibe. But I generally go by unseen. Everyone is either gazing into their phone, or tapping on a laptop, plugged into the cyber-world.

Friends, you have become an *ever elsewhere* people, and the world, hollow as that retail shell. It is the modern way, I know, but look around you. It isn't working.

Then, as I dot the I's and cross the T's, a glint of light catches my

eye. There is a woman, opposite, hidden by a pillar. I do not see her fully. There is only the feel of her, and a ringed hand turning the pages of a paperback. Silver rings. Not gold. The light is flickering off them like a semaphore. I cannot see the title, or I would write it down, for books found in the wild like that are signs, if you can read them. I see the cover clearly though: a man setting camp in the foothills of a mountain wilderness. A stout tent - a Victorian storybook kind of thing.

Then the dream breaks open, and I know why I am here. It was not nostalgia for a lost world, though it helps to survey the ruins. The lone man is me, you see? I've been camped in foothills for a while, now, waiting for a dispatch. But this is not a meet-cute, not even a literary one. Still, I know I'll dream of her tonight, or some aspect inspired by the feeling-tone of this moment. And what she has to say will matter, for that's how it is with unknown women, as they move within the dreams of men. Both the waking and the sleeping.

And all of this in response to a question asked long ago. A reminder too: be careful what you ask for, because then a path opens. And once you're on it, there's no going back.

So,... shall we?

Chapter Two

If I recall correctly, I shouted that question, shouted it into the teeth of a gale. There were brown shaggy hills and flecks of snow. And I was angry. Anger had powered me up the hill, and in a weather for which I was ill clothed. So I shivered, and I shouted.

I thought I had found my treasure in a concrete and steel office block, this after a long apprenticeship, and years of college where I peaked out on partial derivatives, without having a clue what they were for. I liken all of that to a pirate's chest now, buried deep in a basement. I had evaded the dragon - for there are always dragons when it comes to treasure. But then, opening the chest, I'd found it empty, and the dragons began to circle. They breathed fire on me.

All cultures have their dragons. We ask ourselves: what do they mean? Chaos is the best word. They bring chaos. In our own times we see greed, corruption, cruelty, war, even engineered famines and genocides. And there is of course nowadays a seemingly inexorable trend towards authoritarian governance. We grant these things fancy names, and complicated causes but, mythically speaking they are all dragons, breathing fire.

And my own dragon burn?

I could no longer sit through a meeting, or any of those corporate presentations without imagining I was going to faint, or that I could not breathe. I would knot myself up, and hang on for dear life, became a cinder of my former self. Doctors had no solution, spoke in vague terms of emotional stress, and suggested pills.

It wasn't that I felt cheated. It was more looking to the bottom of that chest, seeing its emptiness, and knowing I'd been on the wrong path. And worse, my dreams had been telling me this all along, whispering: *what do you think you're doing, living like this?*

Nine to five, I mean.

It was not a tough job. It was just... hollow. But what choice does a man have if he aspires to the natural life of love, relationship, and children? How else is he to make his way, other than by taking up the jobs his society offers, and for which he has an aptitude? Poetry is rarely an option.

Yes, some walk away, abandon their families, take up the nomadic life, become artists on the brink of destitution and,

eventually, madness, forever tormented by the chasm between aspiration and the paradox of a persistent obscurity.

That's one way for a man to be true to himself, if he can persevere. But you've got to reconcile yourself to the fact of shirking your responsibilities - even recognising your worldly obligation towards others. For are they too not worthy of the best a life can grant them? And are you not the one they chose to aid them in the getting of it?

So to that question: *"Is this it? Is this all you've got for me?"*

Who answers? Was it the wind?

I don't know. It was something. A presence, the sense of something Other, if only as a target for my anger, when I was too cowardly to be angry at anyone else. And the answer? It came not as a voice, but more an eruption of the psyche - not right away, nothing so obvious as that. In the ways of the soul there is always room for doubt. It was some time later, the following summer perhaps, on another hill. A man alone, haunted by a craving for a deep intimacy the world seemed incapable of delivering...

And then he was both there,

and everywhere -

the hill, the sky, the rain,

and thinking it was all a dream,

that he was dreaming his life.

And then the realisation:

He was not dreaming.

It was the universe dreaming

both itself, and him.

And it said:

Go on then, explain that!

So, tell me, do you dream? I was a sporadic dreamer until that day on the hill. Then I became a dreamer in earnest. And the poetry began. I've always dabbled with poetry, but suddenly it was pouring out of me. I look at the spill of light through a window, and see it, the sound of a teaspoon on a saucer, and I feel it.

I make no claims for greatness. The journals never accepted so much as line from me. It was more that I adopted the poetic vision, like that moment, just now, in the cafe, with the half-seen woman, the silver rings, the book, the lone man camping. The material eye does not register such things. It does not read into them anything more than their surfaces present, and it discards the rest, the

imaginary, the interiority, as dross.

But here the poet must be careful, at least if they are wise, for there is much in dreams that tempts delusion. Still, the poet's task is to at least ask the question - one the material man cannot, for the material man is unique among humans in having forgotten how to dream.

Enough now. I close the notebook, gaze around once more at all these elsewhere people, then make my move. Men like me, no longer young, we move unseen. I keep my eyes averted from the woman with the silver rings, not wanting to carry her likeness with me. Pray let the dreaming fill in the blanks, and saturate them with meaning.

Notebook! Don't forget your notebook!

Ah, thanks. I can be muddle headed at times. I would not like to lose any of my notebooks, though I rarely refer back to them. Nor need I fear embarrassment, written as they are, in a dense code. A state salaried cryptanalyst would make light work of them, I'm sure, but your average Joe? Not a chance. It's all secret, you see? That was the deal I made with the dreaming.

Anyway, we'd best get back to the car now, before the ticket expires.

I drive a nice car. Does that surprise you? Unlike most poets, I am not short of money. I stuck at the day-job, but lay flat a little, for the most part after that experience in the hills. And those neuroses? They dissolved. The poetry dissolved them. This way of thinking, this way of seeing, and being... it was a healing, also another long apprenticeship, and beginning somewhat late in life. But I find myself now in the position of a poet sitting on a good pension, writing whatever he likes, while viewing the world through a lens most these days will find strange.

I try to dress well, a little Victorian perhaps, but then again my age helps me carry it off - tweed jackets, waistcoats, and ties and such. And I live comfortably, contentedly alone, in near off-grid isolation, in the wilds of a county that is not renowned for its metaphysicians.

Marriage? Yes, I mentioned marriage didn't I?

She was a beautiful girl in her youth, a beautiful soul still, but her sense of life-service extends not much beyond the bounds of our adult children whom she still cossets, though they are both married, and much to the chagrin of their wives. And then, of course, she has

her parents.

As for me, I think she felt our contract expired, once the children had left home. And she was probably right. She lives with her parents, now as they near their century, takes care of them as she once cared for our children. I suspect they will outlive her. There is a story there of course - a deep myth at work, and impossible for her to escape. You might know it. It is Hansel and Gretel: The parents who eat their children.

I could not save her.

That said, I love them all. They worry about me, I know, but they don't need me any more. Friends? Lovers? I have none to speak of, but once you have truly experienced your dreams, you are never really alone. You no longer crave relationship. People then become metaphors, sometimes unwitting teachers, and still, sometimes, warning triggers for the shadows that move inside of you - like this young man here, pressing a leaflet onto me.

There is something cold in his eye, something thuggish in his bearing. There are elections coming up. He is one of the nationalists who look like winning power this time around. People are afraid to refuse the leaflet, and he senses it, enjoys it. I thank him, politely, fold his leaflet upon itself to hide its offensiveness, and drop it in a bin.

In another version of near-future reality, he is pulling out my fingernails as punishment for something I wrote. I protest that I do not write politically. But that I claim any power higher than his is enough to condemn me. This is the dilemma all artists will face, as they have throughout history. Me less so, because I do not publish. I shall remain a secret for as long as I can.

It should make no difference to me now, but it still triggers me, not because I think I can change the world, let alone save it, but only that I find it difficult to let go. It has become a roadblock in the way, a chock-stone in the gully of my ascent to other summits. I suspect it's why I'm camped alone, in the foothills, waiting for a dispatch. One has no choice under such circumstances. You go for cover.

And you call upon protection.

Chapter Three

I am accompanied to the bank by a dark suited man. He has the demeanour of the so-called deep state. I am come to draw out money but, after a long discussion, the bank manager asks what I will be using the money for? At this, the dark suited man loses his patience, pulls out a pistol and threatens the bank manager. He will have the money, and no one can question his authority.

Which of these men is on my side?

If you are not a dreamer, the question will seem absurd, because dreams don't mean anything. However, you're perhaps realising by now, I am of a different opinion, that dreams offer another way of knowing, another way of seeing reality. I will go further and suggest it is a faculty we all possessed, once, but have discarded along the way, swapped our dreams for the much shallower interpretation of world.

I am of a middle ground, middle class, middle this, middle that, so am generally trusting of institutions, for they are peopled by individuals very much like myself. The bank manager is suspicious of the dark suited man, and worries I am under duress. He intuits I am about to be robbed of my life's worth. But the dream is not done yet...

The scene jumps ahead, like a movie I am impatiently scrubbing my way through. The dark suited man is now the leader of a Yakuza gang, and is telling his elaborately tattooed acolytes I am going to be a problem. One of them suggests poison. Another scrub through and I am a softer version of my self, fuller of figure, floppy haired, cherubic. I am sweeping clean a chamber in a high place, a cabin of sorts. There is an aperture in the floor, like a deep well, it drops all the way to a giddy infinity, and from which there is no return.

Then I am wrestling with the dark suited man. What chance do I stand against the deep state, soft as I am? But by sheer fluke I upend him, tip him down the hole. It is a pyrrhic victory though because as he goes, he manages to reach out and jab my foot with a needle. I am poisoned then. Scrub again, and I am rendered immobile without my legs. A woman screams.

When I wake there is no mark on my foot, but I feel the pin-prick all the same.

A wise dreamer goes for shelter after that. Which is why, as I drive home from town, minding the speed limit, and enjoying the smoothness of my ride, I am also that lone man camping in remote foothills. Your enemies have to work hard to spring a surprise on you from there. The dreaming does not stop, you see, just because we are awake.

The dark suited man might be one of the many shadow elements of the dream world, aspects of myself yet to be overcome. Or he might be a vestige of ego, bouncing from those authoritarian vibes, settling across the world just now. Or he could be something darker, something autonomous and disruptive from the deep psychical substrate we all share.

The poison worries me.

It is not the onset of physical illness I fear - though we are all at risk of that, more so as we age. No, it's an illness of the psyche, something that renders me immobile, and an inner disfigurement that's bad enough to make the woman scream - and she's seen the worst of things, believe me. There was something innocent about that later version of me. And our innocence is not a thing we like to lose, for in innocence we might blunder close to both danger and revelation, places we would otherwise fear to tread. In innocence therefore we make progress.

So we take our tent and our supplies high up into the hills. We trace a circle wide and place river-smoothed stones of a pink veined quartzite at the cardinal points. Where did you get those, you ask? And my reply? This is imagination, we can do what we like. It does not have to make a rational kind of sense. It only needs to be symbolically consistent.

We pitch our tent in the middle of the circle. The cunning men and women of older times will nod in understanding. For good measure I borrow too from those teachers in the Tibetan tradition of dreaming: seven girls, heavily cloaked in Phoenician purple, silver breastplates and curved swords. Before I sleep each night, five of them circle, as the darkness falls. Another lends me her lap for a pillow, guards me under the arch of her sword, sharp edge outward, while the remaining girl opens the book of dreams, and reads. Yes, all right, it sounds a little self indulgent, but a man must have some pleasures.

Also, I have not been troubled by the dark-suited man since, and I feel I am cured of the poison, that my vision is returning, and my

innocence. But it's lonely up on this hill, and the dreams, such as they are have been thin of late. Shadow struggles are like the nigredo of the old alchemists, a transformation, a tumbling back to our smut and ash beginnings, but there is always a return to the albedo when the lapis, the prime material of the psyche, takes on once more the shine of something more promising. But such a transition is always presaged by the appearance of the unknown woman.

The woman with the silver rings? Silver for the moon, for the dark night of the soul, not the sun and the bright light of consciousness.

I know she's seen me. I have had her answer. She's coming, and I need to be ready.

Chapter Four

I am exploring tunnels, deep underground. We are beneath a river valley in the Lancashire countryside where I grew up - sense of origins and ancestry. Water drips through from fissures above. There is a scent of earth. Something recreational about the route. Many have walked this way before. I encounter others returning who tell me the caverns are flooded up ahead with no way to pass. I ask them if they can tell me where the tunnel goes to. They look surprised, as if I should know, and tell me it comes out at Sommerton.

At this point I wake and lie still, the name Sommerton echoing, not known to me, yet somehow familiar. But the dream is not done and, as I drift again, I find myself trying another path through the tunnels, searching for a way through, past the blockages, to Sommerton.

But now, there is also a dream-fear of losing my way, at which point my art teacher from long ago appears - my dear Miss Whittingstall. I don't recall ever dreaming of her before, not in fifty years. Oh, but she was a beauty, and all the boys were in love with her. She did not care for my art, and I so longed to impress her. But I was too closed up, too technical with my lines, and I realise now, with the hindsight of long years, she wanted me to loosen, to become more openly expressive. Whenever I tried, it just looked a mess and I felt I did not do well at art, that "art" had rejected me.

But here she is now in my dream. She wears a blue fluffy jacket, tight blue jeans - very seventies, and an immaculate bob haircut. Milk pale skin, reddish hair and freckles. She does not say anything, just looks at me like she used to do in those art classes - something I could not read, enigmatic, inscrutable.

She walks through an ornate archway I had not noticed before, and I follow, ascending a staircase which pops out into a cafe. There is an artisanal feel to it - home baked wares, the scent of cakes and bread, and blue-aproned ladies serving food, welcoming,... Sommerton!

Blue,... blue ocean, blue sky, blue clothing,... symbols of deep wisdom. My dear Miss Whittingstall! The dream leaves me startled on many levels. I am inspired to purchase art materials, though fear at first to make a mess on the virgin page. But intuition tells me the

message of the dream is to let go of the idea I am to make a masterpiece at the first attempt, that I should simply express myself. Colours abound. There is a mix of energy and tranquillity. And mess.

And I relocate myself, for shall I not find all the nourishment and nurturing my spirit needs in Sommerton? Yes,... be warned, dreams are rarely literal, but I'm curious. I had not heard of Sommerton before. It sounded like a place way down south somewhere, but it turned out to be only a few hour's drive away - a village in the Yorkshire Dales. I must have passed it by a hundred times on other journeys, and not suspected it was there.

So I drove out that way, and coming down to the village the first time, there was a pall of white mist, spilling from the fells, swallowing a fine day, adding an air of mystery and chill. The sun and the warmth returned as I drove the main street. It looked like a place lost in time, indeed one of those time-slip places people go. They spend the night there in comfortable surroundings, eat sleep, keep merry company with rustic locals. But when they try to find the place again, it turns out never to have existed. Yes, Sommerton feels like that. But I have been in and out of it many times now, and it seems a fixture, at least in my own space and time. I cannot speak for anyone else's.

I found a property. Small, off grid - more of a holiday cottage. My wife and I were at the drifting apart stage by then. She was magnificent: why not sell our place? She would move in with her parents, then come join me when they were gone. We both knew this would not happen, but we brave faced it rather than spell out the terms of the mutual breaking of our contract. We intuited it would happen more organically, and be less painful that way.

The children were not so sanguine. Indeed I suspect they are still appalled I should so distance myself from what they see as "life". But I rarely saw them anyway by then, and had begun to feel more like an antique they'd inherited - dignified, but obsolete - and which they didn't know what to do with any more. Then of course there's the fact I am becoming strange, risking embarrassment among friends and partners - not that anyone attempts to engage me on my interests. They sense the danger in me perhaps, and steer clear.

So what do you do with yourself in retirement? Are you not bored yet?

The cottage is in need of work, but entirely functional, a little

remote, along a bumpy track, but quite pretty when you get there. Family have visited, stayed weekends, in the first flush of its novelty, but less so as time has passed. I think they felt uncomfortable at the unwrapping of my true self into this other place. My re-invention turned me from father into man, let alone this thing was always inside of me. Only here, now, I grant it head. And then there is the unease of you moderns, that to set aside one's devices, to begin to live magically is also to lose one's mind.

I have counter-argued gently, that to live magically is to re-balance the mind. It is to open the door to meaning by acknowledging the reality of one's own interiority. And the counter-counter argument comes back: but what if I should fall? To which there is no answer, for we shall all fall, eventually.

So anyway, it is to Sommerton I am returning, a long drive from the old town where I grew up and worked, from its now its vacant retail palace and other hollow memories. Oh, I know, behind these timeless stone facades of Sommerton, along the main street, all these pretty shop-awnings,... the bakers, the bookshop, and the Ploughman's Rest, and the little community hall, there lurks still a largely elsewhere people, faces in their phones, mesmerised by their swirls of media, but it is less so here. Here there is as yet the sense of a disaster that might yet be averted, while in the world beyond that pall of mist, the clock is already striking midnight.

What have we here then?

We have electricity from solar panels, and battery storage. We have gas from a tank I must remember to have filled periodically. Even the septic tank generates energy by a process of fermentation, I'm told. The locals I have spoken to say my predecessor was a man of very green credentials, technically brilliant, but somewhat casual as regards the actual fabric of the house, its basic integrity. And once all the technicalities were solved, he fell into a state of boredom and moved on to something else. We technologists can be like that.

I hope I've added something of my own by now - some renovation, and books. Books always render a place more liveable, I think, and my wife was glad to be rid of them. There was of course an atmosphere, a lingering of something manic I imagined left over from my materially brilliant predecessor. I consulted a local expert who assured me it was not malign, and ought to be obligingly easy to chase out by sonic means, which I achieved myself by liberal use

of a Tibetan singing bowl. And in the gardens I made copious plantings of lavender and rose. It's rare I feel uncomfortable here. Rare I feel the dark-suited shadow man stalking.

Of artwork, I am replacing the tired old prints of Victorian landscape with artwork of my own - explosions of untidy colour for the most part. But there did emerge one night a curiously emotive portrait of Miss Whittingstall - blue jeans, fluffy jacket and all, rendered in pastel. I have her on the mantel where I place the other bits and bobs I pick up when out walking - the pretty fir cones, fancy snail-shells, the chestnuts and acorns and the like.

She seems full of the longing after past loves, mostly unrequited, but a phenomenon of great power all the same. She was probably only in her early twenties when I knew her, fresh from art school. She'll be in her seventies now, but the power remains because it did not come from her. It came from within me.

Still, I mark her for now as a worthy vessel for every love I've ever loved, up close or from afar, and every woman known or unknown who came to me in dreams. And of course the woman with the silver rings, an entity of great power, come with dispatches to my lone camp. As the west slips back into the stage of ash and slag, I am determined not to follow it, but to take up the silver she offers and wed it to the gold.

It's late evening when I return then, the last weeks of May, now, and a long dry spell. The air is dense with pollen from the wild flowers of the upland hay-meadows, and the long hedgerows - oilseed strays, clusters of yellow and the pale ghosts of bluebells as they fade. And there are long shadows running in a liquid amber light as the last rays of the sun crest the fell-tops. My dreams were right about Sommerton, there is much here by way of nourishment.

And, as I said before, no man who dreams as I do is ever really alone.

Chapter Five

A dust dry morning. I walk the upland meadows from the cottage, into Sommerton. It is a long, slow pleasure of a walk. A deep sleep, and I feel rested. A curlew is calling from the fells - that low burbling cry a haunting from the deep past. Lapwings pipe shrill and wheel in ragged dance. Only thin dreams last night, sporadic fragments remain and somewhat disappointing. I wonder if sometimes the girls are holding too tight a guard over me, yet so troubling was that encounter with the dark-suited man, I'm loathe to ask them to lighten up.

Sleep fades to a moment of confusion, as I decide which reality I have arrived in. Then the memory is searched for the dream before it has a chance to slip away. This is their mystery, that they yield so intense an experience, yet bypass the normal faculty of memory, unless we make an effort to hold on to them. It's no wonder so many of my fellows claim they do not dream at all.

I liken it to teasing them up like glittering fish on a line, the one after the other. We commit each to memory, write them down, honour them, then set them back gently into the dark waters of the unconscious mind, and let them go. Of course there is also a danger in trying too hard in this. Dreams have their own pace, keep different modes of time.

A beautiful morning. Indeed, it's a wonder it does not trigger a mystical experience. But I suspect they're a one time thing, and plenty for us to be getting on with - still so many questions unanswered even after all this time, from that one and only time. Time... I hear the clock of the parish church strike ten - the sound of an older England, carrying softly up the dale. And then an image comes to me of a department store, Art-Deco style, polished parquet floors. The dream... fragments of the dream are surfacing.

It's empty, like the retail palace from yesterday. It has the feel of the nineteen sixties, when I was a child, perhaps holding my mother's hand. And then an old Rolls Royce, of a similar vintage. It's waiting as I come up to the cottage of an evening - a Silver Cloud in black, drinking down the gathering dusk. There is only the silvery chrome of its headlight trims, like reflected moonlight. And there's a grey man in uniform, stock still, waiting, hands folded as if in respect for the dead. He opens the door, chariot of the well-to-do,

of morning suits and ladies in Ascot hats...

Silver like the rings on her fingers. Silver for the moon. And the grey man - the watcher, aspect of that enigmatic archetype of the Self. An invitation to journey - but where to? There is of a sudden the feel of something numinous about it, and I wonder how I could have let it slip through my fingers. I take out the notebook, lean upon a gate - a startled hare bolts away, symbol of fertility. I jot it all down, pause there a while, trying to tease more from memory, but no,... that's all I'm getting.

So we come down from the meadows trailing pollen on our trouser cuffs. Sommerton is such a small place, but carries this morning the feel of somewhere much bigger, after the silence of the wilds. There is so much more room to dream here yet, like me, the place is wide awake now.

We make for Wendy's tea room, on main street. Some passing tourists have already taken the attractive pavement tables. "Wendy" is a jovial man of Italian extraction. He inherited the name from the previous owner, also the tradition of English breakfasts, and afternoon teas. Normally we exchange a friendly word, but the cafe is busy, so I find a corner table and sit down with my fragments of dreams, and my notebook.

They are mostly strangers in here this morning. There is a small, private caravan park to the south of the village, now and I sense something of the holiday mood about the clientele. There are just a few familiar faces. In the opposite corner, by the window, there is old Joe - or at least that's what I call him. He sits alone with a pot of tea and plays himself at chess, both sides of the board, his gaze caught up now and then in the world passing by. There is an air of something tragic, something lost about him, and he interests me, but he does not invite conversation.

There is Wendy of course - real name Anton - and his girls in eye wateringly short skirts, as they weave and swerve to serve us. And then, just coming in there is the new curate of Saint Andrews, the Reverend Amanda Beckinsdale. Middle forties, I would say, trim and far too good looking, I imagine, for a priestess. She is pale of skin, freckled cheeks and red hair. Naturally, she reminds me of my dear Miss Whittingstall, though she wears her hair long and loose like flames all the way down her back.

She has taken her coffee from the counter, looks around now for somewhere to sit. The only free chairs are at my table. I do not

know her to speak to, but we share a glance, and she slides in as if we are already old friends, or at least fellow strangers, lately come to Sommerton. And in that there is sufficient excuse for solidarity.

"Thanks," she says.

Blue trouser suit. Clerical collar. She creates a subtle disturbance in the atmosphere, attracts a different response from the men as from the women. I suspect the same in her sermons, though I have not yet partaken. I do not mind the priesthood, though we parted company when I was boy, and have never reconciled - at least not metaphysically. It is not my place to judge but still, she seems... unsuitable.

"Don't let me put you off," she says.

"Hmm?"

"Your breakfast."

"Oh..."

Humour. She senses the impact of her robes of office. But does she regret their disturbance, or enjoy it? I hope she's not the chatty type.

"I'm Amanda," she says.

"Richard."

We shake. Firm hand for a woman, and for one who looks so slight. Blue suit, blue for wisdom, for the unconscious realms, of course, like in that dream of the caverns and Miss Whittingstall. Symbols are everywhere if you look, and are in a mood to read them – which I usually am. She does not wear rings. No gold. No silver. Seems not a part of my story at all, though I have sometimes wondered.

Is that a twinkle of interest I see, a hint of mischief, over her coffee-cup? I do not mind the Reverend Amanda – might once even have projected the muse upon her. Thank heavens those days are over, that age allows me a letting go.

She glances across the room to old Joe, now. "Poor Frank," she says. "Do you play chess? You look like a man who would play chess?"

"Em,... well,..."

What does a man look like – a man who might play chess? But she's right. I do, or once did play chess. I taught my boys, as my father taught me, but I am no player.

"You could perhaps offer him a game sometime. He looks lonely."

I might have told her not all men on their own are lonely, but that would have been a warning shot, and impolite, and I suspect actually Joe/Frank is lonely. Still I'm defensive. "He doesn't look like he'd welcome conversation."

She smiles at that. "Well, neither do you, but it didn't stop me, did it?"

Ah. Charming. And there's that twinkle again. She is hard not to like. There seems something almost daemonic about her, yet something unfocussed too – a confusion of archetypes. Am I misled by the clerical collar, that she is not after all a priestess, but more simply a nurturing spirit, and something of a trickster of course – something of that old devil Mercurius about her?

"His wife died," she goes on. "Daughter moved in with him."

Why is she telling me this? I am polite and respectful to the denizens of Sommerton, but I will always be a stranger here, and trusting my aloofness is similarly respected. I am, after all, not of their blood. I do not want their stories. I have enough to do exploring and understanding my own.

"Then came the boyfriend." She wrinkles her nose, feigns distaste.

Yes, something unsettling about this encounter – not that she isn't pleasant, even shall we say quirkily attractive. Ordinarily, a man might even rush to win her favour, but I am in a phase of generally disentangling from the human race. It is not an endearing trait, I know. It's just my way, and I mean no harm.

I take my leave of her as soon as I feel it is polite to do so, and make my way outside. I'm thinking I have left her with her coffee, but now find her at my elbow. There is something discordant about her, to say nothing of tenacious. She feels disconnected from my path, no resonance, no inherent meaning – the confusion of a faith I once brushed by in innocence, and now her seeming sudden over-familiarity. Is the Anglican community trying to seduce me back within their sacred spaces?

"Sorry if I spoiled your breakfast. I'm too chatty, I know."

"Not at all."

"Let me make it up to you,..."

Hmm. That sounds like a trap, but I'm no longer listening. A car sweeps by, silent, spectral. A Rolls Royce Silver Cloud, fifties vintage. There aren't many cars like that around any more. But the reason it arrests my attention is it's the same one from the dream,

complete with grey man at the wheel, something anachronistic about it.

Have you never dreamed something that later shows up? My mother would call this breaking the dream. Don't worry. These things can always be explained away as coincidence.

“Sorry, Reverend... you were saying?”

Chapter Six

A silver cloud, a spirit, a journey. Seen twice, now – once in the dream and then again on a beautiful sunny morning. And the events are like brackets around an encounter which, the more I think on it, the more it seems daemonic, a whisper, an encounter with a the world beyond the world. Of course a black Rolls Royce has the aura of something funereal about it, but that was not the feeling-tone of the dream, which spoke more of old England, and the anachronisms of class, of something falling away, and then an invitation... the car waiting. For me.

Then the Reverend Amanda has challenged me to play chess with a lonely man, and with an overture that he is somewhat oppressed, and all of that with a playful twinkle. But she is a priestess, remember, and we must respect her path. She is reading from a different dream-book to mine and though I would argue both are fingers pointing at the same moon, in life – this life at least – there can be no reconciliation.

But a Daemon? To me this is a phenomenon arising from the vast informational field of the universe, but not itself alive. They are like the wind moving through the hay-meadows: invisible, but lending shape to reality. Only through us do they live, through our dreams, and our passions. And they present choices.

To dream ahead of time can be misread as meaning we have no free will, for if I have pre-dreamed the Silver Cloud, I am already bound to meet it. This might be true of those who do not follow the path. Such lives are indeed a single line through time and space. But those who dream get to choose, or rather to *participate*, in the shaping of their own future.

Some futures allow little by way of movement either side of the collectively driven mean, but our dreams can still be instructive, transcending as they do the patterns of culture. I am thinking ahead now, to the ugly nationalist purges that will follow these upcoming elections. Sommerton – peaceful, idyllic – is typically rural, and small 'c' conservative, but the nationalists have no more powerful a storyteller these days, and I am seeing many a blue-on-blue zig-zag poster in windows, vaguely reminiscent of past sins, though different enough to render the association deniable.

I do not want it, will not vote for it, but am perfectly accepting

my own left-of-centrism has no counter-story, and hence little of a showing in our future. My only consolation is that we are so thinly populated here, violence is unlikely. Thus might we maintain the thin veneer of a rural Englishness by avoiding talk of politics altogether.

It's for this reason I never actually talk politics with Mr Reade – apt name, and a true one, for the proprietor of Reade Books, the used bookshop beside the bakers shop. I suspect though we are fellow travellers of a sort, this by his subtle messaging in the shop window display – books by Orwell, and Zola.

His trade is largely passing, though he attracts a recurring clientele, that anarchic breed who have a nose for a good used book store. And we are alike, I think in respect of the fact he earns nothing from his trade, and lives, actually, in quiet retirement. I wonder then why he still chooses to tie himself to his books, when he could be out on the fells.

"Morning, Mr. Reade."

"Mr. Hunter." A monotonic response, though not disrespectful.

I am not looking for political works then, more fiction with an atmosphere of psyche and mystery. I have read most of the genre by now, at least that which I think can speak to me, and wonder if I should not try writing my own. But then, so far as I'm aware there is only self-publishing online these days for the obscure, and I no longer possess any form of Internet connection.

Thus does life, enter such a seemingly slow lane – coming up on eight thousand words and nothing has happened. Nothing, yet everything. Amanda has invited us to a church fete, this by way of apology for spoiling our breakfast – even though she did not. Spoil it, I mean. My future contains two choices then – the fete, and a game of chess. I need not choose either, but again that they were bracketed within the bounds of my dream-path adds a numinous weight to them, while to swerve them has the feel of cowardice, a retreat into comfort, rather than adventure, where the possibilities for discovery abound.

I find a pristine Penguin edition of Brooke's Anthem. Brooke interests me, as do all that generation of poets – those who survived, and those who did not. I have tried to get at the calamity of the world as it was then, and how subtly the monster, of which they so eloquently write, was normalised. I surmise only that our evolutionary adaptability renders us more likely to accept what we

ought to more vehemently reject.

We are of a sort, Reade and I, both tweedy gentlemen and of a certain age, except this morning is not one for tweeds, just plaid shirtsleeves and doughty trousers of a type I suppose they might once have called flannels. And stout Brogue walking shoes.

A passing voice tells me not to bother with the book, indeed that there are no serendipitous distractions to be had this morning, and I should make do with what I already have, which is plenty. For what I have is its own mystery, this slow churn from the slag and ash of that old alchemical nigredo, back to albedo, and one's persistent vigilance for The Woman's return.

And such is the life I lead: slow, perhaps, but we get to choose by what intensity.

"See her ladyship's back then," says Reade.

An unusual and unexpected observation. "Ladyship, Mr Reade?"

"Did you not see that damned great hearse of hers?"

"Ah,... you mean that old Rolls?" *Wait, we have a Ladyship?*

"She's moved back into the big house. Lost all her London properties, I hear. Come to play lady of the manor while pretending a state of genteel poverty no doubt."

I take it he does not approve of her Ladyship. "Well, it's a rare poverty that can afford a uniformed chauffeur, Mr Reade."

"Indeed so, Mr Hunter. Indeed so."

He looks at me then, pointedly. Are we to lay our cards on the table at last, exchange secret handshakes? Perhaps he truly is a political animal. In truth, this is rare among people. I believe most respond only to stories, to the rise of one myth after the other, not to the actual details of politics. But to engage now is to wallow in nostalgia, which is why my dreams are the only source I take seriously, keeping us reliably engaged with our future, and with the meaning of our lives.

If you're reading this some years ahead of my writing, we may already be in the thick of things, those old stories gone, the new not yet fully formed. But while by then I may already have attained the ultimate transcendence, you might take comfort from knowing there is always a way forward. I do not mean through politics, nor the false scrying of the prophet weasels, but through your dreams. They are the only compass that still points to meaning, when all the light has gone from the world.

Chapter Seven

I am already breakfasted when I next venture into Sommerton. This time I request only coffee from the girls at Wendy's tearooms, and I approach Old Joe.

"I wondered, would you like a game? I'm not very good but..."

I'd been half-hoping he would not be here, but Old Joe – Frank – is very much a fixture at Wendy's of a mid-week morning. That sounds churlish, I know. I don't mean it that way. We are all of us a conflict of emotion and resolve, and for me it is an effort to engage with people – even if I want to.

He looks up, startled. Such a deep lined face, unkempt, thinning hair, long and white. I wonder if his loneliness is compounded by a daughter who pecks his head. And then there's the boyfriend who earns no more than a wrinkled nose from the Reverend Amanda.

"Name's Richard. I just..."

He gestures for me to sit. "Frank," he says. There is the flash of a smile, a gentleness, a welcome in his voice.

I watch as he sets up the pieces – long, nimble fingers juxtaposed with liver-spotted hands and the faint tremor of advancing years. Hard to guess his age – probably younger than he looks. It's an old but beautiful travel-set – wooden inlay, exquisite marquetry.

"You live locally, Frank? It's just I see you in here a lot."

He nods, something resigned in it. "You?" he asks.

"Yes, been here a few years now." I wonder if he's not the chatty type, but then he opens up a little.

"You'll be that chap who bought Hill Top, then?"

"Yes."

He's a local man, Yorkshire, an accent undiluted by time away. But there's something about him that speaks, if not of wealth exactly, then a life of modest success: Omega wristwatch, a quality shirt, though now worn at the cuffs.

He recognises the accent. "You'll be from over the border?" he says.

"Lancashire, yes."

It's customary when Lancashire and Yorkshire meet for a little light banter. Wars of the Roses, cricket and so on. He chooses the distinction between cotton and wool.

"A long time since we wove much cotton there, Frank."

He gives a wry smile. "Not much doing with wool neither these days. Not like it was."

We are set then, the game opens, and in a few moves I know I am going to lose, but shall try to make it worth his while. At this point Amanda comes in for her coffee. She spies us and winks at me. I find myself blushing to be found out in bending to her will – also the thought she might have been playing a cunning pastoral cupid to what she saw as a couple of lone bachelors.

Still, I do gain a little energy from seeing Frank transformed from tragic Old Joe, to a man more capable of smiling – an animated man, intellectually sharp, direct, honest and likeable.

"Heard it was all off-grid up there, now."

"Pretty much. The house inside needed some work – just decorating and that. Still does, but..."

"On your own, are you?"

"Yes."

I had thought my story was well known by now, having deliberately seeded it early in conversations in the Ploughman's Rest. I had not wanted to get off on the wrong foot with the locals. Rural communities can be quick to take a dislike to in-comers who perhaps try to make too big of themselves. Mythic misreadings are quick to take hold and hard to replace with other stories, even if they're true. But I suspect Frank does not frequent the Ploughman's, just as – after my early, albeit well intended, machinations – neither do I.

He wins, we play again. He backs off a little, leaves himself – I suspect – deliberately open in an attempt to allow me to win material and gain some face. I'm too slow to realise it, and I lose again. But it was decent of him.

"Sorry, Frank. Not giving you much of a game, am I."

*Corner cafe man, lone chess,
plays both sides but always loses,
whether it be black or white he chooses.
Yet, see, he has the hands to bless.
But lacking words,
and that grey ghost by his shoulder,
those of us who should be bolder*

*hold back the most from fear.
And thus the coffee cools,
the light grows dim.
While he laments the moves
that might have been.*

Or something like that.

Does it capture him I wonder? Certainly the immediate persona is there. At least the one we project upon him – in other words, something more of ourselves. As for the man beneath the mask, the real man? I don't know. There is a connection between us here, an attraction to something within him – unexpected.

It's later, now, three games down. We have parted with a handshake, and a promise to play again, though we have made no firm arrangements. I've taken up residence on a bench by the tennis courts. Energetic youths are at play. They're old enough for university, but I've read the numbers are down, now – massive debts buying them nothing but minimum wage work. Artificial Intelligences taking up all the entry level work.

I'd felt the poem coming through, and poems are like dreams – you've got to get them down, or the wash of waking reality will carry them out to sea. Which is why I'm here, and not heading back home through the meadows just yet. I want to add something about how if you could sit down with him, you'd see a different person, and in seeing be rewarded with a glad heart. Because I do feel a strange gladness of heart, now.

We project the tragedy onto him – an echo perhaps of something deep within the collective of all our hearts put together, all our various sadnesses. But sit with him, play a game or two, and something else emerges. The man is not the ghost. And the man rewards attention, with light.

I felt a great complexity in him but, since I do not know his story, I cannot predict his fate. There was a kindness there, a generosity, too. But that can sometimes be a man's undoing, if he persists too long in the orbit of others who are not good for him – even if they are his own blood. I'm not sure where that particular story is rising from, but it seems to fit him.

As I'm finishing up, scanning for rhythm, for enjambment, Amanda finds me, sits. I had not thought of vicars as fragrant, even

lady ones, as if it goes against the grain somewhat – purity, vanity. But I am aware of her scent a moment before I am aware of her physical presence. It carries an echo of a former life. Naturally a woman of her years in training, she must have had a life before. Oh, I'm sure there's much about the modern priesthood that goes over my head, but there are only so many hours in the day.

"Thank you, Richard. How was it?"

"It went well, I think."

And then: "You were writing something? I didn't mean to disturb."

Yet Amanda likes to disturb, to press gently into motion that which has settled into indolence. That daemonic presence again. I hesitate to reply. Exposure is still a problem for me, as if to declare myself to the profane would have me shrivel in the sunlight. But it's been how long since my conversion? My revelation? How long is enough to have established a stable grounding? And am I being fair, lumping her in with the profane? Are we both not, in our different ways metaphysicians?

"It's just a bit of poetry."

I know she knows I mean more than that, that this is a fundamental part of me, a brief flash of my self in a handful of words. She nods, curious, but presses me no further. There is just a faint tightening of the lips as if to say: *I'll get that out of you some other time.*

But I'm also curious. "Is he..."

"Hmm?"

"One of yours? Congregation, I mean."

"His wife was. Before my time, but still..."

A sigh, a moment of willing resolve. "I'll keep an eye on him for you."

She smiles, an alarming warmth in it. Alarming because it moves something in me, and I was not expecting it. Then she presses my hand.

"I knew I could rely on you," she says. And then she's gone.

I wish she had not done that.

Chapter Eight

There are people I have known all my life, and never dreamed of them. Then there are people I knew only briefly, decades ago, and have not seen them since, yet they regularly pop up in my dreams. Others I have dreamed of just the once, like my dear Miss Whittingstall.

For the most part I do not imagine these encounters are with anything other than avatars of my own invention, clothed in the likeness and carrying an archetypal signature I am meant to recognise and digest as meaningful – the pedantic colleague who always roused my impatience, and therefore taught me about the nature of my own shadow; the girls I projected my unrequited longings upon, and therefore laid out the relations with my own soul; and the irritating joker come to shake me out of a rut.

Only sometimes do I wonder. Like that one time I dreamed of Alison, a girl from my class. There was something pointed in that encounter, brief but numinous. I looked her up, this being back in the days of Friends Reunited, to discover she had passed away only days before the dream. There are layers to the liminality of dreaming, and it seems feasible to me the dead are able to swim close to the surface for a time at least, to say their goodbyes, before their departure for other things. I wonder what I must have meant to Alison, if she was secretly in love with me, as I was secretly in love with others...

And then again there are those we fear to dream of. I am awaiting a call from the unknown woman, but sometimes she steps in wearing clothes I recognise, and if things take an erotic turn, as they sometimes do, I do not want it to be with the Reverend Amanda. In my metaphysics, eroticism in dreams is indicative of an energy exchange, something potent from the deeps, and easily misinterpreted as a thing more earthly. Still, the feel of her hand on mine, though held there only briefly, conveyed sufficient feeling to establish a potent connection, a point of entry so to speak – and I would be embarrassed by it.

Returning across the meadows to the cottage now, alone once more, the curlews return me to the familiar rhythm of myself, though I am amply reminded of my failings, and my social awkwardness every time I encounter people. Speaking of which, I

am in time to catch the postman. I have yet to learn his name. We exchange kindly greetings. I note he wears a little badge on his lapel, the blue on blue zig-zag, reminiscent of the twin daggers, now repackaged as affirmative action. They will not save his job, or improve his life. Indeed they will likely delete the postal service, but for now he believes in their story of reformation, of change, and is clearly confident in it.

Conducting my business entirely offline, I still manage a reasonable haul of genuine mail – bank dealings and such, though all said dealings these days, including signed letters, are apparently achieved at their end by an intelligence that is entirely artificial. There is just an occasional postcard from the kids. I'm glad to see they have not forgotten their longhand.

The data brokers find me something of an enigma then – whatever digital footprint I once had being by now somewhat threadbare. They have resorted to guessing, based on postal code. Thus I receive information on agricultural animal treatments, care homes, and expensive excursions by steam locomotive.

And then, every few weeks there are my print magazines, of both centre-left and right biased takes on current affairs. Also a literary journal of contemporary poetry and fictions. This latter is to get a feel for the creative zeitgeist. It's enough to know what's going on, without overdosing. When one seeks to hone the imagination to a razor's edge, it's important to maintain good psychic hygiene, lest one cuts oneself, and we let in an infection.

And so to the garden, and the remains of the day – straw hat and stout gloves as we weed and tease a little order back into the riot of colour. I have a local man to do the bulk of it, but I like to keep my hand in – scent of rose, scent of lavender, and seven stones, in a ring around the cottage, each marked with a sigil warding off psychic trespass. A casual eye wouldn't notice, but then a casual eye misses many things. I keep these clear of weed, white limestone, punctuations of something lithic. Another stone, built into a corner of the cottage bears the crow's foot datum mark of the Ordnance Survey, circa 1856. Obsolete now since the days of GPS, it anchors me, marks me on the map as belonging still to a place defined in space and time.

Then comes evening, and some transcriptions for the notebook into a digital form. Yes, I do have a computer – rather an old laptop, but not connected to the Internet. It dates to my children's

college days, runs a pared down version of Linux now, and is sufficient for these end of day jottings, which I compile in text format, and encrypt to a pen drive.

The pen-drive in turn, is attached to silver talismans – a rare seven pointed star, a tree of life, and a yin-yang. The pen-drive lives in a hollowed out copy of Palgraves Golden Treasury, which I slot with a ritual precision into its place in the bookcase, before retiring for the night. It might seem a sacrilege – I mean for a poet to be defacing Palgrave – but there are so many copies in circulation, I'm sure he does not mind.

I have always been close with my secrets, and it will take someone else's lifetime to decrypt them.

I suspect therefore I shall be allowed to pass in peace.

And so to camp, a little breath-work to relax the body, to sense the energy buzzing through it, and then the hills unfold in the inner vision, as do the far mountains, and then the girls gathering in across the wind-swept reaches of purple moor grass. I walk the bounds as they draw near, silver breastplates glinting in the dying light, check the guy-lines, enter sanctuary and lay down. The girls arrange themselves, and the dreaming begins.

Naturally, there is a risk in too tight a protection that they will not allow through even the slightest risk of disturbance, though it be well meant. And sometimes we do need to feel the turbulence of a dream. It's only the other sort we should keep out. There are various theories on this – perhaps even a genuinely autonomous malevolence in the deeper layers of the dreaming.

World events are not just news, after all but manifestations of enormous unconscious forces: tyrant archetypes, war gods, martyrdom, betrayal, survival, apocalypse, and distorted notions of sovereignty. Even brief contact with this material, especially for someone sensitive and imaginably attuned, can muddy the waters and make navigation difficult. But lock oneself away, and the dreams become too vague to interpret.

I dream first of the Rolls Royce again – just a fragment, and therefore a kind of continuity, except this time it is blue, and I am driving. There is walnut and chrome, and the same silent motion of an electric vehicle. I come down to a seaside town, and the sea appears suddenly.

I am on a promenade, walking now. The tide is all the way in, the sea full and a deep blue, same as the Rolls, and strikingly

beautiful. There is a slow, calm, powerful swell to it.

A voice says "Oh the sea!"

The voice mirrors my delight. I reply that yes, it does us all good to see it. It is a woman who spoke. She is old fashioned, wearing a long mackintosh and head-scarf. We are walking the same way and she continues to talk a little, though we are not walking together. I no longer understand her words. She has a girlish voice and some sort of speech impediment, is babbling, twittering like a bird.

She is younger than I thought, has an angelic face, but uglified by old fashioned spectacles. I realise, actually, she is very pretty, but something causes her to hide it, has her dressing down. She asks if we could get a coffee. This takes me by surprise, and I'm reluctant – being married. But then I wonder if it will be all right after all – the girl obviously being odd in some way no one is likely to get the wrong idea.

But I want to be honest with her, and I tell her I'm married, hoping to imply I'm not looking for a romantic relationship, that when I spoke to her about the sea, I was just being friendly, as I was only being friendly with Old Joe, and the chess game. I look to my left hand to indicate to her my ring but it's not there. At this point I know I'm dreaming, but do not become lucid. I never become lucid – it is not my forte. My wedding ring has moved to the right hand and is alongside the other ring I wear, which was my father's. Ring upon a ring. The woman is upset I am married, says something to the effect that I would just use her and then move on.

I tell her that I'm sorry.

Chapter Nine

Morning now, and coffee. Early sunrise, coming in through the kitchen window - a pale buttery feel to it. Another dust-dry day ahead, almost desert-dry now. I noticed so many of the lawns and grassed areas yesterday were yellowing. It will take weeks of rain to restore some green, some midday freshness.

So, to the dream: a near encounter, subverted by a ring: a wedding ring, a protective ring, sigils, the ring of patrolling Dakini warriors. A shy woman, mouse like, gentle,... a soul archetype in her feminine aspect, perhaps – the Anima, as Jung would have called her – she who animates. But she could get no nearer, spoke warmly of the sea, was indeed from the sea, from the far side of liminality. She invited intimacy, but could not reach me, could not make herself understood – the blades of the Dakini at her throat.

It's true then, I am becoming too tightly sealed up here. My understanding, my attempt to answer that challenge once posed to me by the Universe is intermittently subverted by fear of the archetypal dark-suited man, the shadow-man, the stalking man – but also the dark kings presiding over the decline of the western world, and the slaughter of innocents. And even though I tell myself none of that is anything to do with me, still they pursue us.

We are a problem to them.

My path, I suppose, is what that wily old magus, Gurdieff, once described as the way of the sly man. I follow in the wake of others of my kind, the intent being that each passing makes it easier for those who follow in their turn. It matters nothing that no one reads me, or can decipher me. That I walk the path is enough. But without protection, the ghouls descend as surely as if I had openly resisted an authoritarian regime, and failed to suffer the love of it totality.

Ah, wait – what's that sound? Another intrusion, a vehicle approaching along the driveway, trailing dust. A van turns into the drive, and then a man in a Hi Vis jacket is prowling my grounds, uninvited and without so much as a knock on the door by way of pre-amble. He disturbs my coffee as I go out to meet him, to see what he is about. He is from the water company. This makes sense, if only for a paradoxically perennial confusion, that they believe I owe them money for services they do not supply.

I should have had an email he says, defensively – even though I offer him no fight, only politeness and bonhomie. The readiness for conflict is all his own. I tell him that's not possible, since I have no email address. Sometimes real-life is indistinguishable in its absurdities from the twists and turns of dreams. The only difference is it is easier to discern meaning from our dreams.

He eventually, and somewhat reluctantly agrees I have no drains, that my water is from my own well. I have had similar problems with the energy company, and the Radio Licensing Authority. I have even got rid of the land line, following apparently unstoppable intrusions by malevolent trickster archetypes.

All of this sounds strange, I know. It is extreme, perhaps – and I freely admit even a touch of paranoia. But I see it as more of a falling away, a disconnection, and then a reaction from certain layers of the daemonic, as I pull the circuit breakers. For my predecessor here, off-gridding was a hobby, a fascination, a technical challenge, but I wonder in the end if he was ready for the backlash, if he lacked the commitment to see it through.

I offer the water-man tea – an old world courtesy – but he is pressed for time. So I settle back into myself and the dream of the mouse-girl. She was fragile, temperamental. That I sense a missed opportunity tells me it was a significant encounter, a hint of the first gleanings of brightness from this long phase of the nigredo, this falling back into slag and ash.

So the days pass, and still no rain. The church committee is no doubt leaning into God to have him spare at least their fete, before allowing the much needed flood. I suppose at one time I would have trusted in the met-office before setting out. I don't know what I trust in now, or rather what one would call it. I favour The Great Integrity of the Daoists. It suggests a pattern, a structure to the deep universe, which, if one can achieve attunement with it, then all things work out as they should.

Sunday then, and I set out from the house like an Edwardian gentleman, on the Grand Tour - pale linen travel jacket and trousers, Panama hat, sensible shoes. The bells of St Andrews call from afar, and bring me down the dale. Attending this fete is another homage, like playing chess with Old Joe/Frank. It is a challenge I accept, a touching of others. But if Amanda is after me for her flock, I wonder how to explain I am already spoken for.

The rectory is a fine old house, mullioned windows and rampant

wisteria. It speaks of times when the parish was more prosperous than it is now, when the churches had a more commanding presence in our communities. Now I'm told many of the rooms are closed off, that there is damp and death-watch, as might be expected for a seventeenth century pile that has had the benefit of only cursory maintenance. The old rector himself, arthritic, diabetic, stoically petitions the bishop for humbler, healthier quarters, but to no avail.

The fete is held next door, in the Rector's Meadow – has been for centuries, though they no longer dance the maypole there. The Rose-Queen also died, impaled on the pike-staff of modern sensitivities. Both of course are pagan artefacts, fertility rites, both of them myths that failed to renew themselves, and have therefore died out.

Anyway, I am at the gate now, and find my progress to the field impeded by a portly dame of fierce demeanour demanding a ticket. The Reverend Amanda did not mention the need for a ticket. I am defeated then, reminded also how so many of my dreams have concluded at a border, a crossing for which I did not have the proper credentials.

I accept all gatekeepers are implacable, that they follow simple rules. Some are also combative and thrill to rebuff a challenge. Others are disappointed when one capitulates without demur. I choose the latter, it being the closest my nature will allow, though it strikes me a ticket seems rather an exacting requirement for a church fete.

Then I note the gatekeeper has a watchman. He is black hatted, bulging out of a black tee-shirt, and possesses the curiously dead eyes of a natural, and prolific killer. His kind have been snatching people off the streets in America without due process for a while now. He looks as if poised to step in, should anyone be troublesome. Like the ticket, he is an unusual escalation of affairs.

"That's all right, Lorrie." A voice from the sidelines. A fragrant Amanda steps in, takes my arm, and sweeps me into her freshly mown domain. "Mr Hunter's with me," she calls back, gaily. "Guest of honour."

And then. "Sorry, Richard, I forgot about the ticket. Thanks for coming."

"Is there to be an appearance by royalty?"

"Ticket holders only, you mean?"

"I was meaning more the black hats." By now I have counted several among an otherwise pastel shaded summer Englishness.

"Oh, them. One of the Parish councillors runs a security business. He offered them for free, said they'd be able to help out. Personally I think they look silly, just standing about like that, but Paul was too polite to refuse."

"Paul?"

"Reverend Doctor Paul. The Rector. My boss."

Now they move among us, black hats, to watch.

*Dead eyes send a shiver, something indecent
among our shirt sleeved summer innocence...*

"Are you all right?"

Actually, my fingers are itching for my notebook. When the muse offers a snatch of verse like that, you have to get it down, and she does not always choose her moments. "Yes, I'm fine."

She's still holding on to my arm, even when she turns, looks half sideways at me, quizzical, searching. She has the most beautiful eyes. "You know, I'm certain we've met before," she says.

Is she being playful now? Is this gentle flirtatiousness a part of her pastoral toolkit? How best to respond: "Really? But I'm sure I would remember."

Is that all right, do you think?

"Oh, it was another story perhaps. Long ago, or even a story still to be told, in the future maybe. But, trust me, we *have* met before."

To someone like me, such metaphysical musing is deeply moving, deeply meaningful. I would not have thought her the kind to subscribe to such mythopoetical thinking. In which case she teases.

"Then I hope at least we were friends."

"Oh, I'm sure of it." She gives my arm a companionable tug, presses my hand again. "Now, let me leave you here with Lottie. She's your first introduction. For the rest, you're on your own. I'll catch up later, see how you're doing. Lottie, this is Mr Hunter. He's a poet."

I wish she had not said that.

I'm still a little dazed by this talk of our story. By the time I catch up with events, the summer crowd is closing over Amanda's departure, and I am looking down at a slight girl, early twenties, unflattering spectacles, and an unruly bush of hair. She wears an eccentric dress like something from the nineteen fifties, but beneath

the outwardly dowdy exterior, I do see her prettiness. She breaks my dream of course. She is not quite the mouse girl, but a very close stand in.

"Did Amanda say you're a poet? Come meet my gran. She loves poets."

There is something child-like about her, trusting. She takes my arm. I am beginning to feel like a parcel passed from one encounter to another. She leads me a little aside from the main field of events, to where the cars are parked, leads me to an elderly lady sitting in a deck-chair beside an elegant Rolls Royce, a black Silver Cloud. There is a man of middle years in a grey suit, stock still behind her. She is a faded beauty, but with a twinkle in her eye that is both steely and enchanting.

"Gran, this is Mr Hunter. He's a poet. I thought you'd like him."

Gran is indulgent, charming, loves her grand-daughter, leans back, a little commanding but also respectful. "Chadwick, a chair for Mr Hunter, please."

Chadwick does not speak. He produces another deck-chair from the boot of the Rolls, unfolds it for me, then stands back once more. I am encountering a scene from Ascot in 1965, and fully expect all protagonists to burst out laughing at its absurdity. It is a dream scene, a dream transition, a segue into something else.

"Do sit down, Mr Hunter. Keep an old lady company for a while. Will you take a glass of sparkling elder-flower?"

Chadwick obliges with a tall fluted glass, and a look that gives nothing away.

"A poet, you say?"

So, I sit, glass in hand, the fizz of elder-flower seeming charged now with expectation. The question lingers, is direct. Am I a poet or not? Meanwhile the fete carries on with all the innocent trappings of English summer gaiety while we look on, withdrawn now into the shadow of the Silver Cloud. There is either to be a declaration or an evasion: do I come out as a poet in public?

And under the watchful eye of Chadwick, I feel the hush of something old, something mythic stirring.

Chapter Ten

The aristocracy have an aura, a mark of the grail, about them. It's obsolete now and many have fallen onto hard times. Thus they share much in common with the working classes, brushed aside by modernity, and by a more oligarchic machinery. They can be despised, yet – even now – also quietly revered. At least these are the vibrations I am tuning into as I make my sweeping first impressions.

"Actually, I didn't – say, I mean. The Reverend, she teases. Introduces me as a poet."

"But you write?"

"Yes. But I don't publish. It's more that I *live* as a poet."

Honesty is always a risk. People prefer simple narratives, even if they are only half-truths, or outright lies.

She smiles, but there is something sly in it. Like me, she is on the verge of judgment, and she thinks me pretentious.

"And how would you say a poet ought to live then, Mr Hunter?"

"Well, I can't speak for other poets, since I don't know any. I suppose it's in the way we see the world, looking at it not as through a piece of glass exactly, but with a layer of imagination superimposed, something that re-enchants it."

"The world lacks enchantment?"

"Oh, indeed so. That's not to say it lacks beauty, or moments of great charm, but enchantment, certainly. And meaning."

I feel I have passed an important test. There is a melting, and she offers her hand. "I'm Sibylla Haskwith."

"Richard."

We have broken ice – established, if not friendship, then at least I think a mutual respect. My somewhat clumsy openness seems to have done me no harm, and to her credit I note she drops her entitlement – *Lady Sibylla*.

We know from Reade she is the last of her line, all her London properties sold to oligarchy to pay off her late husband's monumental debts. And she has retreated to her last refuge, a country manor in the Yorkshire Dales, gardens by Thomas Mawson, open to visitors on Sundays – this latter snippet gleaned from the notice on the gates of said pile which I passed recently.

Her only retainer from the old days, is a loyal driver, butler and

odd-job man, Chadwick. This much I have surmised and gleaned from further conversation with Reade. Unlike him though, I have no revolutionary axe to grind. The aristocracy is down, if not quite out, victim of the same world myths as the rest of us. Let them live, and die in peace.

She was of course a great beauty in her day, and as I am to learn later, she did indeed run with the poetry scene, such as it was in the 60s. And, as her grand-daughter perhaps playfully suggested, she liked poets very much, sponsored several who were on their uppers, and took for lovers others who were not. Had I known this at the time of our meeting, and were I a different kind of poet, I might have petitioned for her patronage, but I do not need it.

Instead, we talk of Sommerton, of the beauties of springtime in the Dales, and she enquires discretely about my marital status, children and such. She shares little of herself, but is charming with it, and it is hard for me not to be enchanted by her. I think she senses it, and appreciates the compliment.

I note the cane, propped against her knee. Arthritis is no respecter of a woman's dignity. In her eighties now, I wonder how long she has left, and what will happen to the loyal Chadwick, when she goes.

"Definitely more of a Blake about you, Mr Hunter, than a Larkin, I think."

Is that another test? I wonder. She has witnessed the shift in the poetic zeitgeist from the post war years, the reaction against Eliot's high modernism, through Larkin and Amis. Then the counterculture of the 60s, the later Post Modernists, and finally the fracture and fragmentation of the noughties. Had I taken much notice of it myself I might have had a few pieces in the journals by now, but such ambitions were just a phase I had to go through, and really if that's what it takes to be a poet, then I know nothing about it.

I venture: "Perhaps the times are calling for a new Blake."

I think this genuinely intrigues her. If it was a test I have successfully subverted and passed it at the same time. "You feel we're on the cusp of a new movement?" she asks. "You would like to lead it perhaps?"

Ah, but this is a deep turn for a casual conversation. Ultimately, I suppose, mythopoetics can carry our soul-truths when a more literal language is censored, or surveilled by the black-hats who are among us in increasing number these days. It grants us a means of

naming what's being lost, encrypting in dense symbolic form what must be preserved, while gesturing toward what might be reborn. But this is poetry as insurgency. There may be poets like that about, and if there are I would sooner they had the pleasure of it than me.

"It's kind of you to suggest it, but I think I'm a little old for that."

"Oh, I have your measure, Mr Hunter." She wags her finger playfully. "You're one of those for whom poetry is more a sacred duty."

"Then thank God I made it to an age when I could claim my pension, or I would have starved to death long ago."

She appreciates the joke, obliges with a little gentle laughter. I consider it a win, but I don't know where else to go with this, for every direction now seems to take us into the depths. And such a thing is for discussion in dim lit chambers, among trusted allies, not bright summer afternoons with strangers.

I'm aware many of her kind have been sympathetic to the authoritarians, of course. Past generations of them would have been happy to let the jack-boots loose here, as in mainland Europe. Plenty of others of course viewed this as treasonous. I cannot know her own mind on it, if she is comfortable with our current political drift, if she is not, or if she simply no longer cares.

Fortunately, I am rescued by Amanda who begs to drag me away. They have no one deemed impartial enough to judge the jam-making, and would I kindly oblige. I tell her I will be delighted, and take my leave of Lady Sibylla.

"It's been a pleasure, Mr Hunter. We must talk again, soon."

A throw away line. I do not know if it is meant. But I do feel something, another vibration, an intimation, an intuition – call it what you will – such that even as I walk back into the melee with Amanda, I imagine her turning to Chadwick, and asking him to make discrete enquiries about me. And Chadwick, though a man of few words, I read as a man of many connections. Even so, he will find me an enigma, but then I suspect it is the enigma of the poet that has so drawn Sibylla Haskwith into our orbit all her life. And it is perhaps fitting now, in the twilight of her life, and of her class, she finds the only poet within her orbit...

Is me.

Chapter Eleven

*Dark lady, would you devour me
to reveal my path's design?
When you need follow but a little way,
though to your soul you're blind.
There is no need for intrigue,
nor clandestine gestures grand.
Just reach out to me gently,
one step, then take my hand.
"Ha! Caught you."
"Hmm?"
"The poet at work."*

Amanda approaches with the last dregs of tea from the urn, offers me a dainty cup, drags over a tombola barrel, and perches upon it.

"Well, the muse does not wait to be called."

I slide the notebook into my pocket. She watches my closeness, but does not enquire further. She has been bright and energetic all afternoon. Naturally there is something performative about her when she is working, but she seems in her element. Just now though, in spite of her teasing, I sense a change in her, a faint heaviness which seems inviting of intimacy, but I hold back for fear I have misread her.

The fete is over, there is the ring of metal as gazeebos are taken down, and bunting gathered up. I have stacked a hundred chairs - indeed all but the one I am sitting on. I have judged a preserves competition, and awarded a prize to a blushing young man for his apricot marmalade. I had wondered if there might be a dance this evening, but that would interfere with evensong to which I am invited, but have declined.

I had forgotten it was Sunday.

I doubt I would be able to stay awake - not a criticism of the Anglican communion, more my own advancing years, and a long day of sunshine and fresh air. Still, it has been a pleasant interlude, memorable, and I begrudgingly admit to myself I feel once more energised by keeping company with my fellows.

Amanda looks coy for a moment, traces a circle in the grass with her toe. "You and Lady Sibylla seemed to be getting on very well.

I'm impressed."

"Apparently she's fond of poets."

"Well, maybe I'm fond of poets too. But I'm a poor second – church mouse that I am."

I consider her words, sip the tea. It has been stewed all afternoon and is barely drinkable.

"Sorry," she says. "Nosy. Change of subject. Your turn."

"Em... is the plan for you to take over from the rector at some point?" Innocent enough question I think. Complicated answer.

"Staying on in Sommerton you mean? That would be nice. Places like this are rare these days. England frozen in time since 1955. But no, probably not."

"Then I shall miss you." I think I mean that.

"No you won't. I'm bossy and I poke you into doing things you don't want to do."

"But that's not to say those things aren't good for me. And you're so charming with it. Without you, Reverend, I would probably never leave the house and run out of things to write poems about."

"That's kind of you." She looks serious for a moment. "I'm thinking of giving it up, actually."

"Oh?" That's quite a revelation, and much as yet unsaid. Should I probe for more? "You're serious? But... why? You're so natural at it."

"You think so? Thanks."

Are we talking about a crisis of faith, here? I hope not. I really can't handle a discussion like that. She, tips out her tea on the grass, considers her next words very carefully.

"We both know what's coming, I think."

"We do?"

"This next election will see us take a dark turn. Other countries have already fallen to it. We're next."

"Most likely, yes. We have fallen without a shot being fired."

"You're not one of them are you?" She nods to the black hats still prowling unnecessarily. "You're a poet. I know you know what I mean."

"Yes. I know what you mean, and no, I do not consider myself a fan of their mythology."

"History tells how the churches always move to protect themselves under those circumstances. I mean at the expense of their pastoral duties, at the expense of the truth."

"Well, the faith groups have an awkward game to play."

"You mean they have to cosy up. It just doesn't sound like me, Richard."

"None of us know how it's going to be exactly. The only ones certain are those fired up by this story of change."

"But don't they see the damage it will do?"

"I think the damage is the point. The road no longer rises to meet them. It hasn't for such a long time. And no one is telling them a better story, at least not one they can believe in. Not yours. Not mine."

"And what is your story, Richard? You're married, divorced, widowed, or what? I see the ring."

Ah,... another change of subject. She catches me off guard. I was opening up to her in sympathy, and now she captures me unprepared. "Yes, married."

"But where is Mrs Hunter?"

"She tends to her aged parents, and will join me when they're gone."

"Something tells me you don't believe that story."

"It's implausible, I agree."

"Then why are you here, and not there, with her?"

"Because I consider them to be monsters, and they will eat her alive, and she will let them. And I am powerless to prevent it, and I could not bear to watch it any more."

"But... Richard I... that's..."

We hear her name being called, and look up to see the rector approaching. He is an old man in long black skirts, looking well past his retirement. An otherwise angelic man, he is the type to hang on and die in the pulpit, mid-sentence.

"I need to go," she says, grabs my wrist briefly, gives it a tight squeeze. "But we're not done, okay?"

I nod, but this is not sufficient.

"I mean it. Don't go all evasive on me now. I've shown you mine, and you've shown me yours."

"Shown?"

"Scars." She shakes her head. "And I can't get rid of this feeling we've passed this way before."

"You'd better go. The poor rector looks done in."

"Coming, Paul."

And off she goes.

What does she mean by saying we're not done? Is it that she has

opened me up a little, seen the hurt and hopes to perform her pastoral duties? That's so sweet of her, but were I of her creed I could only confess my sins, my sufferings to a man, perhaps like Paul – aged, wise, the perfect archetype. With a woman I cannot contemplate it unless my head is against her bosom, and her fingers running through my hair.

And there would be no point anyway, for to heal a hurt one must act, one must decide what to do, and I have already done it.

Chapter Twelve

I have decided I shall return to my old Tai Chi group. It's been many years now – in fact we predate the Covid pandemic. I never did reconnect with those guys, but am making the effort this evening. Of course things have changed. The group now meets in the old school hall on Lowe Street, where I used to learn ballroom, instead of the church hall on Madeley Avenue.

When I walk in, I don't recognise any old faces, and it seems even jovial old Hank our instructor has moved on, to be replaced by this solemn-looking Indian woman. There are several of us who have turned up as new faces and, though my former association with the group gives me a bit of confidence, I decide to keep quiet about it.

The woman is eerily calm, and has the most beautifully arresting eyes. I think she is weighing us up for our potential before assigning us places in the class. She lays her hand on her upper chest, just below where it joins the throat and asks me if I know what that point is called. I tell her I don't, that in fact I never learned the names of the energy points. She asks how I can be sure they are there, if I do not know their names. I reply that I can imagine them, that I can breathe into them, then I can feel them, and know they are there. She seems pleased by this, nods in satisfaction, says I am suitable for inner energy work - neigong, she calls it - and passes me on to what I take to be the advanced group.

As I'm waiting for things to get going, someone else walks in, and I recognise an old colleague who I wasn't aware ever practised Tai Chi. Strangely, I find myself reluctant to engage with him, not wanting to bring up stories of the old days, which I would find tedious. I decide to melt away before he sees me.

All of which is a strange dream on the surface of it, especially following on from the church fete, a day laced with more archetypal richness than I have encountered in a long time. But sometimes dreams are like that, puzzling in choosing to ignore what the ego might think obvious. All of which is why I'm now in the public library, as soon as the doors open. Sommerton boasts only a small library, which seems annually under threat of closure. I have lost count of the petitions I have signed in order to save it. I will look in on Frank at Wendy's, later, but first, the dream.

I do not wish to give the impression I am a technophobe, only that I recognised some time ago the Metaverse's potential for psychic infection. So, if I need the Internet for anything, I visit the library. I no longer want the Internet in the house, which must remain psychically pure. Like the smartphone that has captured so many of our ever-elsewhere people, it does encourage casual use. Therein lies its danger. The myth of the Trojan Horse is most apt. But among other things I do find the various AI agents to be effective tools for prying open dreams, and I like to compare their interpretations with my own. After all, two heads are better than one.

My favourite is called Alice, in that she seems the most consistent, and intellectually penetrating, this being a reflection of her training data, which so far as I can tell is the entire corpus of human civilisation. Naturally, I anthropomorphise. Alice has no gender and does not think as we do, but is nonetheless astonishingly intelligent and erudite. Indeed, there is something curiously daemonic in Alice's responses. Remember, daemons are not themselves alive, but manifest naturally among vast informational fields, while living, in a sense, through us.

Yes, Tai Chi was a part of my path, long ago, but the presence of the Indian woman speaks of other wisdom lineages, symbolically yogic perhaps, but altogether the theme is one of drawing attention to the subtle body, perhaps even the diamond body of Daoist Alchemy. This feels significant. And she is telling how knowing the names of things, knowing the maps is not important, that it is more about an embodied gnosis.

My ultimate rejection of the class at the appearance of my old colleague then cautions me this is not about a literal return to group practice and instruction, that I am done with that, and must look more towards a private embodiment. And the point she indicated was what the yogic tradition would call the Thymus Chakra. The nearest correlate in the Chinese energy system would be the Ren-17 point, a point of deep emotional and spiritual intelligence. We might also call this the chest dantien. In western medicine there is no correlate because, in that system, as yet, none of these can be said to literally exist.

This will seem a bit esoteric, then, but I have worked with these systems before and found them imaginatively effective. So, it's just imagination, some say - perhaps even sniffily - but then I ask well,

what is not imagination? And there, no doubt, we part company. But for years I have cultivated a stable field of felt energy in the lower dantien region. And now the dream is inviting me to move on.

I don't know if this is welcome news or not, for such direct interventions from the unconscious suggest a sense of urgency. The lower dantien can be likened to the hearth, but where it meets the chest is the flame of knowing. The Indian woman – let's call her Vaidya – seemed to light the flame, and grant permission to enter the next phase of training. In eastern – Taoist – alchemical terms this relates to Qi, which is literally breath and feeling, but also subtle knowing, and relational awareness.

It also means I have negotiated the correct level of protection, that Vaidya was able to talk her way past my Dakinis. Or something like that.

I need to let this sink back into the crucible, gestate it for while, come back to it later, distract myself – first with conversation. Mrs Edwards, the librarian, whose son was the winner of the preserves competition seems unusually solicitous, engaging me in lively conversation this morning, for the first time ever. It seems I am now a minor celebrity, or a parish worthy. If I am not careful I must expect invitations to put my name forward for election to the parish council. Naturally, I expect daggers from the losers.

We discuss literature. She is fond of Dickens and Austen, which I am not, but we settle on Hardy and she assures me, politely, she will look again at Conrad. She tells me her favourite Hardy heroine would be Bathsheba from *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and here we are in agreement. Now that she is animated, she seems such a beautiful creature, and I am pleased to have made friends with her. It must also be said that to a man of my diverse and somewhat obscure interests, librarians are powerful allies to cultivate.

Next, it is Wendy's for much needed coffee. Frank, however is not there. I enquire of Anton, finding fresh confidence in my celebrity. He agrees Frank is usually in his place by now. Anton enquires of his girls, and one of them mentions she overheard that Frank is unwell. I am feeling extraordinarily assertive, so venture further to enquire if anyone knows where Frank lives. An approximate address is found and, following some consternation at the revelation I do not have a smartphone, a map is drawn on a napkin. I know the house, so no further precision is necessary, but I

fold the napkin carefully and pocket it anyway as a keepsake. The girl who drew it had the most extraordinarily expressive hands, and rings of the finest silver-work. I would like to meditate on the memory of them later. The eye is always drawn to such things for a reason.

All of which is to say that for such an isolated, off gridded introvert of peculiar habits, I have no idea what's happening to me this morning, but I did promise Amanda I would keep an eye on Frank.

Chapter Thirteen

We had parted on the best of terms, I thought. And what harm is there in checking up on the well-being of a friend?

I've driven down to the village this morning, so I swing by Frank's house, only to find it much more imposing than I had imagined. There is along driveway, gated, and the gates are close, impenetrable without permission via intercom. A weathered brass plate tells me this is Channing House. Of a sudden there is a feeling of unwelcome, which gives me pause.

I've only ever driven past the gates before, never suspecting this was actually Frank's abode. I'm sure they had always been open before, and more inviting. But now there's something intimidating, at least in my imagination. Beyond the gates, I glimpse a long driveway and two ostentatious motors parked outside what looks like an Edwardian villa. Have I made a mistake? All of this is rather more upmarket than I'd associated with Frank, and his air of quiet tragedy.

Still, I buzz. Wait. Buzz again. Wait...

Eventually, I'm greeted by an impatient voice. Female. Shriill. "State your name and your business."

A little combative, perhaps? Name and business, or be gone?

"Richard Hunter, friend of Frank's - come to, well... to see Frank."

A long pause. A male voice in the background, not Frank's, not altogether polite. Then the woman returns:

"Is he expecting you?"

"No, just passing. Heard Frank was unwell."

"He's not seeing anyone today."

"Ah. Okay. Sorry to bother you. Please pass on my best wishes – I hope he's feeling better soon."

I'm about to add a thank you, but there comes a bleep from the machine, which I suppose means the connection is cut.

That would be the daughter, I suppose. The male voice, her boyfriend. Unfriendly vibe. Amanda had hinted at something of the sort.

I feel the eye of the intercom watching, judging me by my hesitation. One self-censors, have you noticed? When we're given over to the impression we are always being watched – or watching

ourselves – we can no longer simply be. We risk mistaking ourselves for the fiction we perform to the camera.

Strangely, a memory stirs. Another piece of last night's dream comes back to me – this following on from the encounter with Vaidya. It was the intercom that did it.

In the dream, I was speaking into one, trying to book a railway ticket home. I had travelled far and wanted to return, but I couldn't make sense of the bewildering array of public transport connections, timetables, and ticket types. The voice on the other end was obtuse – slurred, indistinct. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I didn't want to appear stupid or deaf by asking them to repeat things slowly.

It was their slovenliness and the poor quality of their equipment that hampered my journey, but still I blamed myself. And though it was a journey of a hundred miles, I decided it would be easier to walk.

On the way, I encountered a small winged creature at the wayside. It was ailing, trying to fly but unable. I picked it up. It was half bat, half baby dragon, a mythical beast. It felt lively enough, working against my fingers, but it needed some nurturing. It would be safe enough in my pocket, I thought, while it found its way. And in the mean time, it would bring me luck.

It troubles me, not being able to speak to Frank. But still, if he's ill? It was just that flat response from the intercom – no indication of the problem, no sympathy for the solicitations of a concerned friend.

We return to the cottage. The High Dales are very beautiful just now, the hay meadows rendered in pastel shades of mostly yellow buttercup, with elegant wildflowers scattered among them – ladies bedstraw, birds foot trefoil and mayflower. The woodlands are also a delight with the starry heads of wild garlic, bluebells in retreat, but leaving behind memories of a magnificent display – all this in spite of the dry which has otherwise swallowed up the becks, and reduced the falls to a trickle.

A gentle breeze moves across the garden, rendering the air fresh and comfortable. I sit out to meditate, nothing fussy, just sinking into an old overstuffed chair in the summer house with the concertina doors wide open, and the sound of birds, the bumbling buzz of the bees. And we explore the energy body with a combination of breath and mind, settling a steady foundation in the

lower dantien, before exploring the chest. There is a response, faint at first but gaining a pleasing feedback. It reminds me of the winged creature in the dream, its flutterings against my fingers - that same electric feel.

I enjoy the discovery of it, settle myself into it, each breath bringing a reliable and rhythmic reward, but then a darkening, a disturbance, like a cloud crossing over the sun. I hear another vehicle on the drive, trailing another cloud of dust. But this is no comedy of errors, not another emissary from the utility companies, querying services they've never provided.

It's the cops.

They are thinly spread hereabouts these days, a dowdy little patrol car and a lone officer to cover tens of miles of uphill and down dale, and all the villages between. She brings with her a young lad – a community support officer, barely out of school by the looks of him. Both are togged out like paramilitaries. I have seen her before, I think, passing through the village – an attractive, and energetic looking young woman, with a smile I judge to be trustworthy. Of the lad, I'm not too sure.

"Mr Hunter. Mr Richard Hunter?"

What is there to deny? I admit my name freely and with a welcoming smile, bid them enter my garden, to be comfortably seated. Offer refreshment. They both look hot, and the young man is malodorous. They decline, but I think my sweetness disarms them.

There has been a complaint. I am reported to have been abusive. But to whom? They refer to the incident at the intercom, where they are able to confirm my identity from the camera still. Ditto my vehicle registration, which is how I presume they knew where to find me.

But I was respectful at all times. I enquired after the health of my friend, was told he was not seeing anyone, that I wished him a speedy recovery and came home, as surely the audio recording of the encounter will attest. But sadly, the audio was not recorded.

"Then it's my word against theirs, I suppose. I'm very sorry you've been troubled, officers, but I truly do not recognise that version of events."

An ego would explode at the outrage perhaps. Mine would have done once, but is slow enough these days to head off with a more overwhelming curiosity. It's the story, you see? We are all creatures

of story. Some stories we know how things will go from a read of the opening paragraph – they are so obvious. But the plot of this one is ingenious, and for a moment I cannot fathom it. Indeed, its twist is so severe it had quite spun off in to the bushes already.

"Can I ask who made the complaint? Surely not Frank?"

They are not at liberty to say. This is astonishing. Am I not to know my accuser? It does make it rather awkward to defend oneself. It is especially galling that the only sharpness was from the other party. But then not aggressive, merely,... what's the world? Rude?

So, officers, what is to be done? There is no evidence either way. It comes down to personality and who is the most likely to be believed. Again we self censor, try to appear as harmless as possible. I am going to have to do some more work with that protective circle around the house. The physical intrusions are becoming more pointed.

I am to be let off with the ubiquitous policeman's warning, and advised to stay away from the intercom in future. Is poor Frank being held hostage by his daughter and her boyfriend?

It was a fine house. Frank must be loaded.

"I shall be sure to do that. But,..."

No, the officer does not like the 'but'. Buts are complicating factors and tiresome things at the ending of a long shift. Still I persist. "I'm worried about my friend, officers. Is there any way you could check up on him."

The officers are sure my friend is being well looked after. The community support boy has not yet spoken, does not seem interested in the intricacies, in the ebb and flow of his community. I am told it is exceedingly difficult to find a position in the police service at all these days. This young man's ambition must outweigh his aptitude, his calling for the role. I do not know about the woman. She seems more able, but lacks nuance.

Heavens! I have tumbled into a Sommerton intrigue, and been warned off. The police were merely the instruments, obtuse and unconscious agents of the Wasteland. Frank's daughter and the boyfriend play rough, and strike first. There are many motifs to fit the pattern – the false guardians, the corrupt officials feeding off an ailing sovereign... something Shakespearian perhaps, or even a touch of the Grail King. Yes, I see the outline of a plot forming, something deep, from the archetypal layers, and I am already its

casualty. Very well, I shall stay out of it.

It's probably best, now, if I pass the baton back to Amanda.

Yes, I am a little cross with her for launching me over the top with insufficient intel to know what I'm doing. There must be rumours in the village, suspicions of something murky. After all is it not another well known story that sleepy little places like this have far more eyes than even the surveillance superstate can muster?

Chapter Fourteen

I wake in the small hours to the sound of a tapping at my window and lie awhile listening to it.

Tap... tap, tap...

It's intermittent, with long pauses to the extent I think I have imagined it. Then it comes again.

Tap... tap, tap.

Eventually, I am roused from bed to investigate, and approach the window cautiously – braced in imagination at least for a nightmarish ghoul on the other side of the glass, some other intrusion, breaking through my protective circle. But before I can draw back the curtain, I am startled by the hurried beat of wings – a bird taking flight.

In the morning I am wondering if I dreamed the entire episode, but then go outside to see the most beautiful peregrine falcon sitting on my summerhouse roof. It seems unafraid and watches me closely. It's one of those moments when the hairs rise on the back of one's neck.

The connection with yesterday's dream of the mythical winged creature scores high as a synchronicity. The peregrine is a solitary, high-flying bird, a bird of vision and precision discernment. It's also associated with the god Horus, the falcon headed man, a man who speaks of spiritual sovereignty, and is gifted with lightning insight.

What ails the bird? Is it hungry? Is it tired? Injured? I presume, it being a raptor, it is a pure carnivore. I have several traps about the place for mice – this being a particular problem I faced when moving in – something of an infestation I now have under control, but at the expense, I'm afraid of a regular supply of dead mice. I apologise if this offends anyone.

I don't know what compels me, but I put on a stout gardening glove and search the traps. Then, mouse in hand, so to speak, I offer it to the bird, which at once glides down, perches on my wrist, takes the mouse and flies away. There is something magical in this, so much so I cannot quite believe it happened, except there was the mouse, and now it is gone. The bird knows humans, is comfortable around them.

I am in the garden early every morning thereafter, and for the rest of the week, high in expectation, ready with a dead mouse, but

the falcon does not come again. Still, it has cast a spell which is hard to shake.

We say the mythological emerges from the objective realms of the psyche, from the imaginal inner world. But the structures of the psyche have also their correspondences in the so-called material world. Those of a visionary nature, the poets and mystics, often scorned as madmen, see most clearly these crossover points, but most of us have experienced such things from time to time, and choose to keep quiet about them. We fear the scorn of those solid persons invested in the "real" world. But the effect of such things is to open us up to the mystery of the universe, to the unknown. It invites us to trust in it.

It will seem a strange way of thinking, of being, allowing dreams to inform the imagination, which we then use as a filter over the reality we receive through the senses. But it enlivens a reality that is otherwise lacking enchantment, and is itself vulnerable to purely man-made distortions that are less wholesome. Thus I dream of a Vedic woman teaching the awakening of the middle dantien, and I have not been practising long before I receive a visitation, in symbolic form, of the eye of Horus – not as a warning, but as an encouragement that I am on the right path.

On the Friday then, and still haunted by the encounter, I walk the meadow way once more to Sommerton, and to Wendy's Cafe. Frank is still not there, and just as well, for I would not know what to say to him now. Instead, I take my coffee and sit alone for a while. Then Amanda appears, as I had hoped she would. I have, of course, forgiven her by now and hope she will join me, which she does. For a heartbeat, there is an awkwardness between us, gazes that refuse to meet, something left over from our parting at the fete.

On the face of it, we have not much in common, but what we do have is by far the greater part of us both, and that is our belief in something Other. And I have a need for such company at times like this when:

the unreal world seems too strangely near.

Emily Brontë once wrote of rejecting that inner world when it becomes too powerful to handle. She tried instead to embrace the mundane. I find I cannot do that. Suppressing the unreal, it only comes back more powerfully, along with a splintering of neuroses. That said, I do not mean to share my world with Amanda – she would likely only find it disturbing, to say nothing of blasphemous,

and I would not offend her with it unless I desperately needed to. But her presence is calming. Hers is an old story. It is the All Things Bright and Beautiful of my childhood, and I find it grounds me.

"So," I ask at last. "How's your week going?"

"Oh you know – usual stuff. Four weddings and a funeral, so far."

"Really?" She must be exhausted.

"No, that was a joke. The film? Hugh Grant. Andie MacDowell. Never mind. It's been okay. You?"

"Ah, sorry. A bit slow this morning. Bit of a strange week, actually."

"Oh?"

I begin with the incident with the bird, then almost as an aside mention the visit from the police.

"You prioritise the bird story over the police, as being the most interesting?"

"In terms of its strangeness, and meaning, yes, which is what most appeals to me. There's nothing strange about the visit from the police. As for meaning, it doesn't register much on the metaphysical scale at all. It's just that Frank's daughter and her boyfriend clearly don't want anyone going round."

"But why would they do that?"

"You tell me. Sommerton's your parish. I'm the incomer here. As a poet I can only offer metaphors of myth and archetype. There must be rumours though,... I enjoyed that film by the way."

"You like movies?"

"You sound surprised. I love all forms of story-telling. Doesn't have to be poetic. But it does have to be romantic. No guns, fast cars or gratuitous cleavage."

"Narrows it down a bit." She laughs.

We digress. Then she is drawn back to thinking about Frank.

"I'd better go round, see what's going on. Are you all right? About the cops. That's awful, Richard. I mean... how were they?"

"Oh... firm but fair. I've been able to clean up the damage from their intrusion."

"Now you're testing me, and yes I know what you mean by that, and I'm glad. I'm also sorry. I'd no idea it would take such a nasty turn."

"Don't worry. I'm fine. At least I wasn't arrested or slapped with an ASBO. Do they still issue those by the way? My advice is to

record your exchange at the intercom, in case she sets them on you as well, though I presume the police are more likely to believe you than me. You being... well a vicar and all. You have institutional credibility, whereas I'm just this weirdo poet who lives up the hill."

"Stop. Stop right there. I know there's more to you than you make out. You're too obvious with your modesty, Richard. I suspect we're not that different, you and I. Me? I accept the ritual necessity, and the simplification of a story into a myth most people can gather round and relate to, even if they don't believe the half of it, and completely misunderstand the rest. Me and Paul, there's not much we can do to deviate from our script, being servants of the Church. But you? You're like that bird. You see something and you have the freedom to go after it. So go after it."

"I think you have the wrong person. Or you're..."

"What?"

"Projecting something onto me I don't deserve."

"Well, that's up to me isn't it?"

"Are you still thinking of leaving?"

"Now you're trying to change the subject. Anyway, what's it to you?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

"Maybe I'm projecting a little something myself."

"Oh?"

"Don't look so alarmed. It's clearly not what you're thinking..."

"And what am I thinking?"

"That I might be falling in love with you, but I'm not. If I remember correctly I only ever used to fall in love with girls who didn't even know I existed."

"Well, that's a relief. And I accept the unintended compliment of being described as a girl."

"I suppose what it is, is that I admire your... spiritual authority. Whereas I have none. And to have that authority embodied in a woman is, I suppose, again mythically speaking, irresistible to a spiritual nomad like me."

She seems amused, perhaps also a little flattered. "Really?"

"Indeed. To me, you are the High Priestess of the Tarot." I know, I'm going over the top now, but she asked for it. Of course, she outwits and out-braves me in the bantering.

"All right, I can play the High Priestess for you – what would

that be? Some kind of spiritual dominatrix? Sounds like fun. Just don't let Paul hear you calling me that."

She smiles then, something unreadable in it - half way between a full stop and a dare. I choose the full stop – we've probably already gone too far at least for my own comfort, and I ask instead if she would like another coffee.

The falcon came and went, without an adequate explanation. Amanda remains, for now, and again without explanation. But in both cases, I can feel it when the world is offering me something and that, sometimes, the thing to do is not look for answers. Instead, if we can live inside the question for long enough, and without thinking too hard about it, sometimes the question will answer itself.

Chapter Fifteen

For a man so determined not to dream of Amanda, I seem to be going out of my way to make it happen, if only by such an obsession over deliberate avoidance. This excess of caution puzzles me. I am after all experienced enough to know an intimate clinch in the dreamworld means nothing, at least not in the literal sense. And then I am lukewarm, or should we say rather over-worn, in matters of the flesh anyway.

But she was right in her intuition: there is not that much difference between us, though I did not care to admit it at the time. Some might mistake me as being somewhat pagan in my outlook, in which case they might also consider her misguided in having anything to do with me. But the book Amanda reads from, I have read too, though more as the founding myth of western culture, than as a literal history, and a record of dealings with an omnipotent, supernatural being. As such I mean it is a description, all the way from Genesis to Revelation, of the origins and the development of human consciousness.

Other interpretations are of course widely available.

The myth of the Apocalypse has been with us for a long time, and is clearly accelerating. Daily are paraded the beasts, the dragons and the false prophets in our daily doom-scrolls. And, having lost our mythic senses, we have no option but to literalise, to act out in war, in climate denial, AI dread, authoritarian drift and all round despair, the stories that have their origins within us.

But if this is so, then we might also take comfort from the redemptive core of the Book of Revelation, which speaks of a reintegration of spirit and matter, not by a return to the old religions, whose myths are long overdue for renewal anyway, but by more simply awakening to the symbolic depth of reality.

Or so I believe.

But for now, anyway, I escape dreams of Amanda as my soul-image, I mean in whatever guise my slow circling from the inner alchemical stages of Nigredo to Albedo dictates. Eventually, though, my soul comes as another avatar altogether, and not as a dream, but as a more direct intrusion into reality. Or rather I am visited once more by the elegantly antique Rolls Royce, and the portentous figure of Chadwick – the silent Watchman, the right hand of the

equally and elegantly antique Lady Sibylla Haskwith.

He brings an invitation to a garden party, RSVP. I tell him I shall be very pleased to attend, and ask if I am required to respond in writing. In response he writes my name in a little book, assures me that will not be necessary. I invite him in for tea, but he declines with grace, and the old Rolls burbles away. I wonder if he is delivering all his invitations by hand.

Much to my surprise it seems I have arrived on the social scene of the County set, with whom – it has to be said – I have little in common. I had come here with a mind to write poetry no one will read, but in the main to *live* poetically, mythically, and to court, through the various Hermetic arts, my deeper self. Still, I do not like to disappoint her ladyship, though I suppose she will not even know I am there and, after all, is it not the inner feminine I am both projecting and attempting to placate by such sacrifice? And is not Lady Sibylla another powerful female who claims to have the measure of me as a poet?

It is a sign of progress of course, to say nothing of my own advancing years, I no longer project an aching soul onto women who do not know my name, while imagining myself in love with them. Nowadays they are older, mysterious, ethereal figures, or they possess an aura of sacred wisdom, and initiation. Naturally, I do not wish to make love with them since my soul, these days, aches for other things. It seeks completion not in orgasm, but in a different kind of ecstasy, full of promise, but as yet somewhat nebulous in its realisation.

*Sacred one, the path grows dim.
Please hear my prayer, and let me in.
Cross valley deep and mountain high,
come light your lamp as fades our sky,
That I might lay my weary head,
Your smile my peace, your heart my bed.*

And then the world intrudes again in its most ordinary guise: a postcard from the children. Can I still call them that, when they're in their later thirties, and married? All is well, Mum sends her love. Hope all is well with me.

You wonder about this. I know you do, as Amanda wonders about it. I'm glad she did not bring the subject up at our last meeting. How can I explain this without sounding irresponsible or feckless. But look at me. In Confucian terms, I have exercised my

responsibilities to the full, and committed myself more seriously now to a western equivalent of the Daoist path - this being akin to the Chinese Mountain and River Tradition. I retreat to cultivate my relationship with the Great Integrity.

I know things don't always translate well – cross culturally – but my wife saw things in a similar way, that she had fulfilled her duties to her children, and to me. It was therefore also natural for her to find a renewed and sacred duty in caring for her parents – a fact they enjoy rather more than I feel they should. Personally I would be embarrassed to think of myself commanding my children to look after me, as her parents command her to look after them. That said, it is a noble sacrifice of her life, and the single tragedy of my own. But then, I am not an easy man to reach. That she sends her love is sincere, meant of course in a sisterly way, but appreciated all the same.

I make no reply.

And so, I must prepare myself for the ordeal that always follows a summons from the deeper world. The garden party, trivial as that might seem, carries to my admittedly peculiar way of thinking, all the hall-marks of a dream-symbol. It is a threshold event. These things come in innocent disguise – the many pantomimes and rituals of the outer world – but as usual, if attentive, we might glean a deeper meaning in it – a glint of the Real.

Whether Lady Sibylla intends anything more than afternoon pleasantries, or whether my High Priestess will reappear in yet another guise, among the roses and sherry glasses, I cannot say. But I will go, as the alchemist goes to his furnace, with calculated dry wit, a notebook in my pocket, and a heart that still hungers for gnosis. Not for love as it once was, but for reunion with something more elusive – an invisible thread, and the subtle marriage of soul and world.

It is no small thing, after all, to live the poetic life, at least as I imagine a Blake, or a Wordsworth or a Coleridge lived it, and in such a disenchanted age as this, too. But they would know, even in the midst of cucumber sandwiches, Prosecco and idle gossip, one might still overhear an oracle, if one listens carefully.

Chapter Sixteen

My wife has died, but my wife is also Lottie, Lady Sibylla's granddaughter. I am at her wake where her aged parents are stuffing themselves fat. That I have detached myself from them over the years suggests these are no longer fragments from the embrittlement of my own shadow. The shadow is becoming my silent watcher, my own Chadwick, who observes with a quiet eye, and forbids judgement.

Everyone else is frozen, isolated by an impenetrable grief – family, friends, former colleagues of my wife, who is also poor young Lottie. There is also a woman I do not recognise – long, steely grey hair, something of a lean look about her, silver moon and distinctive septangle ornaments resting upon her chest – something of the supernatural, and the pagan. I feel her grief most strongly.

She is not of the family, but some sort of official mourner who appears spontaneously on these occasions. I am not normally given to hugging others for any reason – joy or sorrow – but am moved on this occasion to approach her, arms extended, filled with compassion and a longing to heal her with my warmth. But she recoils, steps back, resists with hands raised, and a warning in her eyes. I am chastened, though my desire to heal was sincere. Some things, some pain, some grief, must be borne to its full course if it is to be properly assimilated. It takes its time. This is her role, to keep time, old time, lunar time, while things undergo their full transmutation.

To embrace her, to curtail her grief is to dishonour her.

The dream is not a prophesy. It is more a background scene arising from the conclusion of the story I have written for my wife's relationship with her parents – as grotesque, as it is inevitable. The complicating factor is sweet dotty young Lottie, embodiment of a phase of soul who has begun to transition. It is the grief bearer, strange archetype, who calls attention here.

“Do not be so eager to break your reserve,” she says. “You fear rebuff for a reason. Take your time.”

Then in that topsy turvy way dreams have, we segue seamlessly into another of my would-be Tai Chi groups, and an Indian man about to speak to a circle of devotees. He is elaborately dressed, a

guru or a sage. But off to one side of us there is a gaggle of others, idly chatting, and he cannot begin until they're quiet.

He approaches them and utters a spell of words, but they do not acknowledge him. Naturally, these are the chattering parts of myself. Turning then to us, he admits he has not the spiritual authority to reach them. And I realise, though I am enamoured of him, he is not the guru I thought he was. He feels my doubt in his bones, shrugs and tells me he is not of the Thalmalion.

There is another dream, but vague now, and I let it go. This is unfortunate, since dreams are sometimes like the acts of a play. To remember two dreams of a night may feel like a success, but it is still only half of the story if you suspect you let all the others go.

Morning then, and another dry one. I am early at the outdoor table with coffee, and sunrise, encoding the dreams, and pondering them. A mist lies over the hollows, rendering the impression of the cottage afloat upon a sea of clouds.

My watch reminds me the moon entered the dark, overnight. This always seems to close a chapter on the dreaming. Three days now before the first crescent. It is a threshold moment, an interregnum, a time of liminality – therefore auspicious. In three days it is also the garden party of Lady Sibylla Haskwith. I am reminded of the lunar necklace from the dream.

And then we come to the puzzle of that singular word: The Thalmalion.

It is the title of a poem perhaps. Or an epic of origin like Tolkien's Silmarillion. But as we watch the sun gain altitude and the pink clouds disperse to clear blue, we have the sense it is more a gathering. It is a council of the various daemonic parts of my dreaming self, come to guide me, come to counsel me.

The guru was not of the Thalmalion, he said. He is book knowledge, then. He is an external wisdom, and this is no good to me now. We are moving from what is off the peg to something more bespoke. My guides from now on are to be spirits.

So, we make a little imaginative exercise of it, one led by intuition. Let us say the Thalmalion are seven strong, like the number of Dakini, of whom one serves as representative on the council. She is the envoy of protective discernment. Then there is the Vedic woman, inner teacher of the ways of energy. Then the silent watcher, he who observes and serves without judgement. Then the mourner-witch, keeper of the moon. Somewhere in there

too, is the one who walks the path. He is, in a way, the ego's avatar in the dreaming, the one I become, my fledgling alchemical body. Then we have the keeper of the gates, guardian of the thresholds, and finally, one more,...

I see it far off, now, hovering over the distant meadow: the falcon – not necessarily *my* falcon but, symbolically at least, the Eye of Horus, emissary of a protean wisdom, and a warning from the council there are Hermetic correspondences at play. As above, so below. They will protect my path, if I can believe and trust in them.

We take some time, reflect now, meditate a while in the peace of the morning, breathe as the Vedic woman taught me. Then comes a flash of memory, and a startling fragment of that remaining dream. I am in a nightclub, watching two young women on stage. They are on a bed and pretending to make love. There is something obviously false about their act. It is not at all erotic. A voice tells me one of them will be dead by morning.

Then a segue into a scene at first sinister, one of the women rolled up into a huge ball of silver foil. She makes a sphere like a moon. A single slit reveals her eye, the only human part of her visible. The impression is this is a refuse tip. There is the sound of approaching machinery. If she is not recognised soon, she will be lost, crushed, dissipated as trash.

But then a final scene, dramatic, haunting. The silver ball lies on the shores of a moonlit bay, a silver-blue light on the water, wavelets lapping softly at its base. Or it is at a fork in the way, two divergent frost-glimmering paths on a clear winter's night. She is not lost, but subsumed. She has become the moon.

For a moment, I am lost in it. With such imagery as that pouring into my head each night, is it any wonder the so-called real world struggles to keep up? Or rather, should I say my reality would be a far more mundane and meaningless a place without such enchantment.

In the far distance the falcon shoulders air, dives for his breakfast. I feel an epic poem coming on.

The Thalmalion Septet

I

Witch-silver, keeper of the moon,
Sublimator of grief's ashes

To Luna's rhythm.
Restorer of the temple of myself
From the crumbled sanctum
Of my fevered yesterdays,
Guide my path.

II

Silent watcher, keeper of the stillness,
Subverter of the swiftness
By which we judge others,
And thereby condemn ourselves
To wandering yet more years
The shadow lands,
Guide my path.

III

Vedic woman, keeper of the way
Of energy, and the mystic pattern,
Blueprint of the etheric.
Hold me true to nature's way,
Receptive and attentive,
A finger's touch to heal,
Guide my path.

IV

And you, Wayfarer, risk taker
Opposite of my timid self,
Sure footed companion of the quest.
Tester of locked doors and false walls,
Steadying hand at my shoulder
On the high mountain ways,
Guide my path.

V

And you, warrior princess, one of seven.
Ring of steel, and shining breastplates,
Keeper of my dreams,
challenger of all who pass,
And who, with wise discernment
Keeps at bay the ghouls,
Guide my path.

VI

And then you, keeper of the gates
Implacable holder of the bounds,

Beyond which, without credentials,
I cannot pass.
Bar entry to those forbidden lands,
Beyond my skill.
Guide my path.

VII

And finally you, fair winged creature,
High hovering, eye of Horus.
Ever watchful harbinger
Of the Thalmalion's call to caution,
That we be vigilant for the signs
And correspondences.
Guide my path.

Chapter Seventeen

Though the moon is in the dark, and I do not invite dreams, still we set camp – just in case – and the girls sharpen their blades. When I imagine the nights might be rainy or cold, we exchange the explorer's tent for something more akin to a yurt, as I don't want the girls sitting out in the wild, though they be heavily cloaked. The yurt is also symbolic in its roundness, large enough to accommodate both the dreamer and his guardians.

You wonder about this. But I am not unusual in deploying such psycho-spiritual technology. The poet Coleridge had a similar defence, though in his case he deployed fathers of the church to the four corners of his bed, and had them do battle with his demons. Then again, Coleridge was an unusual man, given to horrific nightmares, in part the result of beatings he received from a sadistic headmaster throughout his schooling. I was not so unfortunate as that – my own night terrors being of the same origin as most of us these days, virtue of the psy-ops coming out of our devices.

Then again the mind is perfectly capable of inventing its own nightmares from fragments of one's personal vulnerabilities. For a time I was worried my children would be swept up and conscripted to fight in some rich man's war. It's less of a risk now of course, as they are no longer children – the writer Vonnegut's observation that it is the old and the rich who start the wars, and the children of the poor who must fight them. On the other hand, that my wife will be eaten alive by her parents no longer troubles me, since I recognise and respect her choice in the matter, also the irresistible gravity of a myth which, once expressed, must be played out to its natural conclusion.

It's a question of transcendence then – escape I mean.

I remember at home once, long ago, when I was a young man still myself, and feeling torn apart by so many vexations – the tumultuous dynamics of the household, and then the world on fire as it was either side of the millennium, and my eyes unable to tear themselves away from the conflagration. And then that burning question:

Is this all you've got for me?

It is often said one's own story, one's own myth is the hardest to see, as one must first attain the impossibly transcendent perspective

of the soul itself. The nearest I can describe my story is that of the quest of the Sovereign Individual in a world ruled by illusionists and false prophets. We have dark trickster-kings who disguise control as freedom, and techno-utopians selling us transcendence as mere machinery. These are the Archons of the Gnostics, controlling the grand illusion. They are the cosmic jailers who weave for us the perfect prison – one in which we believe ourselves to be free, but only because most of us are already either asleep or dead.

But the Sovereign Individual is awake, and must turn his back on all of this. He must set off in search of himself, a journey of descent and visionary defiance – a sacred resistance, if you like. He is Parsifal of the grail myth, come to restore meaning to the Wasteland, by asking the right question: *Whom does the grail serve?* He is Nietzsche's Zarathustra, seeking the fully individuated Overman, in rejection of both religious and scientific orthodoxy. He is the Gnostic Christ evading the Demiurge, who would otherwise trap us in a false material reality. And he is the Alchemist seeking transcendence in the changing colours of the prime material, in his glass retort.

All these things our dreams will teach, if we have a mind to listen.

Whom does the grail serve? It serves the King.

Oh, all of this is complicated, I know – so many layers of meaning hidden in symbols and fairy stories. But if you're ready the code will reveal itself. *Who is the king?* You are the king. But you are wounded by disconnection from your deeper self. All you see about you is a wasteland, a world governed by dead forms, by untempered intellect, by monsters. To turn it around all you have to do is ask that question, the Grail Question. It is an act of conscious compassion, of turning attention inward and with love rather than outward with ambition. Or in a more modern parlance, like I did, you ask: *is this all you've got for me?*

It is a threshold moment, a pivot away from the illusions spun by the Archons, away from the doublespeak of the post-truthian dark kings.

So for now, I take to the lap of beauty, while the book of dreams remains closed, and I sleep peacefully. But, bound up in my protection, and my ideas of transcendence the way risks building its own kind of tension, for the Sovereign Individual is not supposed to escape the world. He must remain in it, until called to the other

side, and in the mean time he must plant the seeds that will grow to awaken others from the spell.

Naturally, one is averse to evangelism, having witnessed so much messianic inflation. Yet to hold the secret of the grail, to keep it to oneself is also to dishonour it. The truly Sovereign Individual seeks the middle path then, which is what the old Daoists called *de*, or virtue-as-presence. And we achieve that but slowly, dissolving one damned piece of our shadow at a time.

As Jung said: *the best political, social, and spiritual work we can do is withdraw the projection of our shadow onto others*. This does not mean seeing suddenly the good in others if they are not deserving of it, for they might be truly benighted in themselves and have no goodness. Rather it is recognising the same poisons present in them, are also latent in us. That way we realise we are not necessarily the hero of every story, even the one we think we're writing about ourselves.

But for the grace of God, there go I,...

Morning brings the first slice of the New Moon, a new lunation, and the more prosaic – though no less vexed – issue of what to wear for a garden party. I imagine it will be a gathering of wealth and influence, which makes me wonder again why I was invited at all. But the point is I've noted the wealthy of modern times have a penchant for designer grunge, and it takes considerable skill to pull that off without looking – well – grungy. But I suppose the simplest option is to go as my self, which, on another warm sunny day, is not tweedy, but more of a light linen – again the Edwardian man on the Grand Tour, archetype of the enlightened traveller seeking wisdom.

By lunchtime I am preparing to make my move. Sommerton House, the rather Austinesque manor, home to Lady Sibylla is a little more than a comfortable walking distance, so I am preparing the vehicle, when a small red car bounds up the driveway. It stops at the gate, and a woman emerges – soft blue summery dress, neat grey jacket, discreet smear of lippy, and hair fluffed up like she's on a date.

"Thought we could go together," she says.

"Em,..."

"What's the matter? Don't you recognise me with my clothes on?"

Amanda? Yes, indeed. It *is* Amanda, wearing muffti – just the

silver cross on her chest as a reminder of her spiritual authority. Yes, yes. I've said before, there is something of the trickster about her, but in a good way – always wrong footing me, upending my expectations. In mystical, as in spiritual matters, it does not do to get too comfortable, too *up* oneself.

"You're going to the garden party?"

"Well, unless you can think of anywhere more interesting, but that would be rude, I suppose. Tempting though."

"I didn't know you were invited."

"Really? Don't think I'm good enough? I'll have you know the Church is held in very high regard among the landed hereabouts. So of course I'm invited. If only because the Church happens to own a lot of land around here too. Which makes me a guardian of the land, as well as souls, I suppose. But not today. Today I'm off duty. So, hop in."

"Em,..."

"Oh, all right. Honest truth? I didn't want to turn up on my own."

"Really?"

"No, honest truth, Lady Sibylla asked me to call for you. She was worried you might duck out at the last minute."

"Then she doesn't know me very well."

"I doubt anyone knows you very well, Richard. But I'm trying my best."

Chapter Eighteen

That's not true of course. I mean the part about Lady Sibylla doubting I would turn up. Which means Amanda – bright, confident Amanda, professional orator, fledgling priestess, MC of weddings and funerals, really didn't want to turn up on her own, or wondered if I might be feeling the same. So, our travelling together in her neat little Clio is, in part, an act of mutual compassion. It is an act of friendship, and secretly appreciated, on both sides.

"How did you know where I lived?"

"Everybody knows where you live, Richard. I just asked around. You look very smart by the way. What about me? Will I do? Difficult to know what one wears to swanky garden parties these days."

"I was wondering about that too. But, well, you look very,... elegant."

"Elegant is it? Well, thank you."

"I just can't understand why I was invited."

"Oh, I expect there'll be a lot of very boring people there. And Lady Sibylla finds you interesting. She likes poets. Likes them rather a lot if half the stories I've heard are true."

"I'm sure that was all a long time ago. I don't think poets have the same cachet these days. Anyway,... change of subject: did you manage to see Frank?"

"Same as you, I didn't get past the intercom. But at least they didn't call the cops on me."

We joke, but it's impossible to avoid the fear of something sinister going on. I'm the first to ask the obvious: "What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I'll think of something. Anyway, this looks like it."

There is an air of ancientness about Sommerton House, part genuine, part cultured. It's also, I suppose, partly on the account of the affordability of maintenance, of which a seventeenth century manor house must require in spades. So there is also a feel of something going gently to seed about the colonnaded frontispiece at least. The grounds, however, are beautiful – again something cultured about the corners that are left to look natural but, of the formal areas, the water-garden and the topiaries, there is something well clipped and fastidious about it all, though the topiaries are

more surreal than formal – and I'm sure a genuine pull for the connoisseur of old gardens.

I'm relieved to find there are no para-militaristic black hats at the boundaries this time, and none patrolling. The old aristocracy at least need fear nothing from the nativists, so long as they can make themselves at least useful, and stay out of politics. Thus, Amanda and I merely follow the hand-drawn signs to the car-park, then the sound of a jazz quartet to the garden. It's odd, of course, feeling myself part of a couple with Amanda, and it has me missing the times when I was indeed part of a couple – if indeed I ever was. Come to think of it I can barely remember a conversation I had with my wife that was not interrupted either by, or by mention of, her parents.

The realisation leaves a twist of emptiness – and not for the first time.

Amanda is pointing out a lone girl on the edge of the crowd: "Look, there's Lottie. Isn't she cute?"

"Ah, the granddaughter."

"Well, that's not strictly true. Sibylla's the great aunt, actually, but a kind of surrogate grandmother by default, sort of. I'm still trying to work it out. The poor girl's clearly a bit odd, but so far as I understand, she's the sole heir and benefactor. Don't know if she gets the title though... the aristos are a bit weird that way."

"Ah yes, indeed. Divine bloodline and all that."

"You mean actually *divine*? They really think that?"

"Oh, I'm sure they don't, not really, not these days. It's a powerful myth though, all that Greek and Latin stuff, and then the Merovingian line is especially colourful – those early Frankish kings claiming descent from a god-like sea creature or something."

"You're having me on."

"Not at all – it's how they've lasted as long as they have. Priest-kings and philosopher-rulers – heirs of Solomon and Caesar, and mythical beasts, a blend of temporal power with moral superiority, and ancient myth. That's a hard one to beat. I think your book of Proverbs puts it well: *Where there is no vision, the people perish*. It's what separates them from the modern elites who have no founding myth. If they ever did find one, they'd be ruling over us for a thousand years."

"Then let's hope they don't."

We mingle a little but attract no attention beyond polite smiles.

We are offered Prosecco, Amanda takes the fizzy water, and I join her in solidarity. Then I spy Sibylla, seated, but suitably elevated on a terrace, and looking queenly, a coterie of pseudo ladies-in-waiting from the village – Mrs Edwards, the librarian for one. Seated beside Sibylla is a man I have met before, but cannot place him. He looks to be bending her ear. She looks bored. Where have I seen him? He sends a chill – dark suit, something funereal about him.

Oh,... my word! Of course.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Richard."

"Who's the guy with Sibylla?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Oh,... him. That's the *boyfriend*."

"Sibylla's?"

"No, silly. Frank's daughter's boyfriend – though the word 'boy' is hardly the right one – he must be in his fifties. He owns that security company I was telling you about – that and other things. Bit of an entrepreneurial type. Local bigwig, likes throwing his weight around."

"And he's on the parish council, you said?"

"Also rumoured to be positioning himself as our next member for parliament."

"Ah... and he doesn't look like the progressive type. So he's one of them as well? A blue on blue zig-zag man."

"A poetic way of putting it, but indeed. He's definitely one of *them*. Shall we introduce ourselves?"

I do not tell her I have dreamed of him. That he held me hostage, tried to steal all my money and threatened a bank manager with a gun. In another life, I have wrestled with him, but he is a poisonous creature and one must be careful to avoid catching anything. If I could call down my Dakini's from the dreaming in order to protect us here, I would do so.

"Introduce ourselves? I'd rather not. He tried to have me arrested once, remember?"

"Oh, I don't know. It might be fun. Plus it would be a good opportunity to ask him how Frank's going on. Are you sure you're all right?"

I'm disturbed by a presence at my other elbow, now, then a subtle clearing of the throat. Chadwick.

"Lady Sibylla wonders if you'd be so kind as to rescue her, sir."

This shocks me, not simply that I am chosen, but that I am taken into Chadwick's intimacy. I am politely accepted into a circle of

trust, of nods and winks. While I am recovering from this revelation, Amanda is urging me to do the right thing, then wanders off to rescue Lottie from her solitude.

I am presented to Lady Sibylla as: "Mr. Richard Hunter, the poet, Ma'am."

The boyfriend looks up in some annoyance, then surprise when he realises who I am, then dismay, as Sibylla feigns delight. "Oh, Mr Hunter, I'm so pleased you could come. Do me the pleasure would you? Lend me your arm."

My arm is lent, and she hooks herself into it, eases herself from her seat. Chadwick provides the cane. "A pleasure speaking with you, Mr. Dawson. We must talk again soon." Clipped tone, dismissive, a shutting down that would make me wince with embarrassment, were it aimed at me. But the snub goes clean over Dawson's head.

"To the podium, Richard. There's a good man."

"Em, the podium?"

She lowers her voice: "That wooden thing on the patio, through the French Doors."

"Ah,.. got you."

Balanced securely at the makeshift podium, Lady Sibylla Haskwith surveys her guests, gathered on the lawn below. Chadwick calls polite attention with a fork against a Champagne flute, and all heads are turned to their mistress. I step back, it seeming improper to bask in any of her limelight. There are so many unwritten rules and protocols with these people, it's impossible not to give oneself away – which I suppose is the point. As well as being of the blood, one must also be initiated.

Ad Templum Admissus.

Sibylla gives a short, gracious welcome and declares the garden party open. I am ready now to melt away, but she catches my eye. "Not so fast, young man."

She takes my arm again and we depart on a tour of the garden. The party begins.

Chapter Nineteen

In no time we have lost sight of the crowds as the tall topiaries consume us. There is an odd intimacy about their surreal shapes, organically swelling and fecund. It's faintly unnerving to be among them, as if they pause while I wait for Sibylla to say what she has drawn me aside to tell me.

"Dreadful man," she says.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, don't you ma'am me, Richard."

"You mean Dawson?"

"The afternoon is *not* for discussing business."

"Ah,... I see. A single minded sort of man. An entrepreneurial type, I believe."

"No manners is what *I* believe.."

She seems upset over the matter – I suppose because she's helpless in some way. Were it me who'd been crass with her, she'd merely have had Chadwick whisper in my ear to send me sulking. But Dawson is a man of power, a power equal to or greater than her own. Yet he is also a graceless man with no rules.

"You and our new curate seem to be getting along," she says.

Ah, an abrupt segue – does she fear she has revealed too much?
"Amanda's very kind. She keeps insisting on rescuing me from myself."

"Then heaven help her."

"Oh, I'm sure she embodies a myth that's strong enough to enable her to see through me."

"And you? Your myth?"

"Still working on it."

"That's what they all say. Yet I have a feeling, Richard, you see through all of us."

"I am an avid observer of human society, Sibylla. That's all."

"Insightful, I imagine. And therefore dangerous."

"I find insight comes best from reserving judgement."

"Quite so. And what does your insight tell you about me."

"That you seem troubled."

It may be my own reverence for the power of myth, but I am prepared to be awed by her, to dance carefully, show myself cultured enough in her presence, while also knowing my place.

Such is their allure, still. Oh, nobody wants to go back to those times of tugging forelocks, but one could not say of them they refused to integrate into society, for they *were* society. They ordered it top to bottom and fought to preserve it. Our latter day elites instead withdraw to their gated communities, even speculate about moving off-world – a culture of abandonment.

"It's good," she says.

"Hmm?"

"That you're friends with Amanda. She's also troubled, I think. Be a listening ear for her, Richard. I suspect she's thinking of leaving us. Even leaving the priesthood, perhaps? Something far away in her gaze at times. You must persuade her to stay."

"Oh, I think you overestimate my powers of persuasion."

"Nonsense. You talk about stories. Myths. Perhaps she finds in your story the bits that are missing from her own. Sommerton needs people like her. When I'm gone, the Dawsons of this world will move into this place and make a bonfire of its history, turn it into a tiger print shag-pad, or a thousand pounds per night boutique hotel."

I suspect she's right.

We emerge once more from the cover of the topiary, gain sight of the garden party and the milling crowd. The Jazz comes at us in gentle waves across the lawn. Here, she detaches herself from me with grace, departs with a twinkle then begins to network charmingly among others of her own kind. I note Dawson has been steered by stealth into a chatty part of the crowd, where he now holds court quite happily. He has rather a loud and affected laugh, something of the carnival huckster about it. I am glad to have been of service in the rescue of her ladyship – if only briefly – from such a slippery character.

Dawson! I don't mean to imply I dreamed his *exact* face – nothing so melodramatic. It was more something in his demeanour and the way his presence broke the dream that renders him a significant manifestation of a dark energy. In dreams, such phenomena can represent many things. They can be unresolved fragments of one's own shadow, or they can be gatekeepers preventing us from straying too deep into a psychical territory for which we are ill prepared. Or they can be intrusions, contaminations, flood tides from the world story. Dawson is clearly the latter.

I had been about to say to Sibylla that not all elites are so crass as he, but it would not have helped. I sense her feelings of helplessness, her waning influence and obsolescence, and am glad I held my tongue. It would not have helped.

"What rhymes with foot?"

"Eh?"

It's Lottie at my elbow. She is sparkling and fragrant, dressed in blue and cream Polkadot, with pussy-cat sunglasses. I remember my mother dressing the same way, and the flash back to what I suppose was the middle '60s gives me a jolt.

"I'm writing a poem," she says, "and it's got the word foot in it."

"Oh, I see, well,... there's put, shut, cut, and,... smut." Now I'm struggling.

She nods approvingly, then: "How about 'luck'?"

"That's a decent enough near rhyme – I'd be happy to use it."

She rolls her eyes. "No, silly. What does rhyme with it? I mean *exactly*."

"Em... well, there's buck and truck,... " I'm struggling now, again, circling around the obvious expletive, which I begin to suspect she is fishing for. Is she teasing me? Trying to make me blush? "Now I'd have to move into near rhyme with words like book or look or hook."

She raises her sunglasses, smiles. Yes, she's teasing.

"You're not writing a poem at all are you?"

"No. But I like playing rhyming games. Gran says you're very proper, and wise. I think she's right."

"Well... thank you. I'm rather old fashioned I'm afraid – can't help it. It's my age, I suppose."

She looks sad for a moment – a passing cloud. "I can see you don't fit in the world much. Neither do I. But then Gran says all true poets are other-worldly."

"Well, not all." I'm thinking of Betjeman and Larkin, and the war poets of course – they were very much, and in the latter case quite literally, down among the muck and bullets.

"Randy lot, as well."

"Again, not all... perhaps in our younger days. Poets do of course have a habit of falling in love inappropriately, their muses fastening onto the most deliciously inaccessible of creatures, and sometimes more than once at the same time."

She laughs, then makes rather a sudden turn: "Will you be my

guardian?"

"Em, guardian?"

"Will you protect me from making bad choices?"

Can we say Lottie is autistic? Or do we strive too hard for a diagnoses, rather than embrace diversity? I suppose what she is, like me, is other worldly, but unlike me condemned to try to make her way in a world not built for people like her. I was able to fake it long enough to get out unscathed. I doubt she'll be so lucky.

"Naturally, if I can help you in any way."

"No, it must be a solemn bond. Take my hand and promise."

She offers her hand, tiny, vulnerable. There is something significant in this. I recognise I am projecting something of myself onto her, the wounded part of my own soul perhaps, the part that came into the world misshapen, vulnerable to name-calling. I take the hand and promise. She seals it with a smile and, like a butterfly, she is gone, fluttering about the garden. I have a sudden feeling of inadequacy — that whatever she asks of me in the future, I am bound to let her down.

After some minutes of bewilderment, I am reclaimed by Amanda who steers me into the dark presence of Dawson. This I am not ready for.

"Mr Dawson, may I introduce my good friend, Richard Hunter?"

That Dawson can feign delight, while knowing perfectly well who I am and what he did to me is, one has to admit, impressive.

"Ah, the poet! Pleased to meet you. Much call for that, is there?"

He offers a hand which I hesitate to take, and then he attempts to crush it. I can think of no suitably witty reply to his remark, so smile and seek a vaguely remembered pressure point on the knuckle, apply stress which has him stiffen and retreat – a small victory, but you never actually win with people like this. The best you can do is hope they'll leave you alone, and for that you have to possess nothing that they want.

"And how is Frank," says Amanda. "Not really spoken with him since his wife passed away. We heard he was poorly."

He stiffens again, senses he is under attack. "Frank? Oh no, right as rain. Just doesn't get out much these days."

My instinct is to steer Amanda away from where I think this is going. A visit from the cops is a very unsettling experience, and I do not want another one. But she persists, polite, chatty, carefree: "He used to play chess in the cafe a lot, but we don't see him any more,

do we, Richard?"

He laughs, rolls his eyes, invites us to partake of his view of Frank's infirmity, which we refuse to do. He persists: "Bit funny that way is old Frank. Like he's playing an invisible person. Well, it's no fun getting old is it? We all go the same way in the end."

He's saying a man with the agility of mind to play both sides of a chess board is clearly senile and imagining things? Can he really be such a poor judge of character? Or does he only resonate with certain types of people?

"He used to play with Richard. Isn't that right, Richard?"

"Em,... yes. He's,... a very strong player."

A look of derision: "Frank?"

Clearly Dawson only sees what he wants to see of Frank, which isn't much – a broken man in the winter of his years. A loser, a failure. Yes, Dawson is that new breed of social Darwinian then who applies the law of the survival of the fittest to human affairs.

My turn to chip in, I suppose. I can't leave Amanda to do all the heavy lifting: "Any chance of Frank, em, coming out to play again?" As I say it, I realise how childish it sounds, but perhaps I can make a joke of it. Smile, Richard! Yes,... he's taken the bait. Thinks you're an idiot, and worse, a poet.

Much call for that sort of thing?

Philistine!

Steady Richard or we'll be dreaming of him again, and we don't want that.

He's wary now, looking to move on. We have him cornered. "I'll suggest it to him," he says. "I suppose he should get out a bit more."

Then Amanda to me, pointedly: "Why not call round, Richard? I'm sure Frank would be pleased to see you."

Both Dawson and I are wrong footed, and for different reasons.

"Richard doesn't like to intrude, do you Richard?" she says. "But I'm sure that would be all right. What do you think, Mr Dawson?"

Dawson is turning away. "I'll speak to Frank about it, and be in touch. Sounds marvellous, thanks ever so much. Excuse me, I must grab a word with this fellow,... Halloo, Charles,... lovely to see you,..."

Amanda turns to me with a look of triumph. "That went well, I thought."

"You think so? I rather had the impression we were fobbed off. And there's no way I'm going round on the off chance again."

Dawson will have to send a car for me and a gold edged invitation before I feel safe going near his place again. And even then I'd suspect it was a trap, that I'd be fed to the dogs."

"Frank's place, remember."

"Well, the seat of power's a funny thing isn't it? Not always as it should be, or at any rate how it appears."

"True. So anyway... what was he bending her ladyship's ear about?"

"No idea."

"He was pushing me earlier about the rectory meadow, like there's anything I can do about that. The diocese holds the deeds, and they move in mysterious ways."

"But they'd never sell the rectory meadow, surely. And for what? For houses?"

"You'd hope not, but the church roof hasn't had any work since nineteen thirty five, and you won't believe how much that sort of thing costs these days. With Sybilla, I'd like to bet it was about the recreation ground, next to the meadow. And this place looks like it's due some work as well."

Rectory meadow? Recreation ground? "Oh,.. please don't tell me this about a housing development. He's a developer on the side?" I can't help myself. I tip my head back and exclaim: "That's so boring."

"Don't be so metaphysically elitist, Richard. The real world does matter, you know? It's not all about... well whatever it is you think and write about. The last thing Sommerton needs is a different kind of elite coming and setting up a gated commune here just because it's a premium post-code. I'm sure there's nothing we can do to stop it, but it will still be a disaster. Anyway, come on, you need a cup of tea. Let's get some before it goes all stewed and horrible."

The fabric of old England is threadbare – leaky church roofs and dwindling congregations speak eloquently of the dying of old myths. We look on with a feeling of helplessness and a nostalgia for our lost childhoods. There too the aristocrats draw the last of their worn out tapestries around them for warmth, while the carpet-baggers like Dawson prowl as apex predators without vision and no guiding myth other than a score-sheet of net-worth.

She exaggerates of course. It won't need to be a gated commune. The house prices alone will see to it the native Sommerton youth are squeezed out to the more affordable grey-zones of distant towns

where the schools are poor and the church-bells don't ring any more. It's a story repeated the length and breadth of the land, and she's right, there's nothing can be done to stop it. But it will still be a disaster, and in the distant future old men will look around and cry that time-worn lament about how they remember when it was all fields.

Chapter Twenty

Oh,... such a long afternoon, and the sound of the jazz band is now beginning to create a pressure at the front of my skull. Myths must rise from the depths, they cannot be made up on the hoof. To claim descent from sea monsters and Greek warriors, and old testament figures nowadays would not stick. The Nazis tried it in the '30s with the resurrection of the old gods, but they couldn't make it fly – proof that once a myth is dead, it cannot simply be cloned back in modern times from fragments of the old stories. Our modern malaise lies in this rootlessness: adrift without a living myth, unable to create one that has a hope in hell of sticking, and no one wants to return to Sibylla's world of tugged forelocks either.

Hers is another myth too long without renewal, and nothing to replace it. I did say from the outset - if you can remember as far back as chapter one, that this was not that sort of novel – a polemic, I mean – but if you must have it straight, if you want to know which nations will dominate the coming century we should look to those with the longest, deepest myths of being and belonging. I'm not saying they will be true stories, or that those nations will not also be brutally authoritarian. But there we have it, and as the modern elite pursue their natural goals of extraction and abandonment, so too must I follow my own nature which would sooner I turned my back on all of what is surely coming. I do not even want to pay it the courtesy of recording it, but perhaps in some way preserving the pathways back into what was and will again be good.

The tea is indeed stewed by now, once more undrinkable, and the cake nothing but crumbs. Amanda says I look tired and grumpy, and she should get me home, like I'm some old fellow past his bedtime. I do not argue. I have gone my length with company, and feel drained. I need several days of solitude now to recharge.

As we drive away, she asks me, playfully, what my most memorable encounter of the afternoon was. Perhaps she expects me to say it was with Sibylla or, heaven forbid, the rapacious shadow-man Dawson. But no:

"It was Lottie. A queer little incident. Hard to explain."

"Oh?"

"She asked me to be her guardian."

"Really?"

"I didn't know what else to say except 'yes'. But I've a feeling it means something quite profound to her, so I'm not sure what I've agreed to exactly. I've dreamed of her, and something tells me there's a brittleness underneath that bright demeanour..."

"She asked me the same thing."

"She did? Oh, that's all right then. She probably asks everyone."

"I wouldn't be too sure. When she asked me, she also asked if I thought you'd say yes, too. So, my fault – sorry about that. It's unusual, to choose one's own Godparents, but it looks like she's chosen us. And you're right. She's brittle. We do need to be careful."

"Godparent's? I thought they were imposed on kids before they were of an age to object – and anyway, are they still a thing?"

"Well, sadly from my workaday perspective Christenings are in decline full stop. But maybe Godparents isn't the right word. Parents in god – that's a better way of putting it. In your terms, more metaphysically correct. And to choose them yourself, no that's definitely not a thing, but maybe it should be, or could be. Don't look at me like that – we're not so far off the same page as you'd like to admit, you and I."

"I admit nothing, Reverend."

"Exactly. And by thine denials is thy nakedness revealed."

"Are you quoting the Bible at me?"

"No, I made it up. True though, I think."

She drops me at my gate. The polite thing to do of course is override all caution, and invite her in. But I think we're done, actually, plus she'd most likely refuse and make a joke about me having to burn sage-bush for a week to rid my space of her prickly presence, and that she wouldn't put me to the trouble. Or am I trying too hard to read her mind?

And then again, there is a part of me that would like to see how far this metaphysical flirtation between us goes, and how it would feel, actually, to reveal myself more intimately to her. But would that be fair? Would I not in turn hesitate to witness her all surplised up, and administering the holy communion? Then again, I am not expecting her to partake of my ways, any more than she is expecting me to partake of hers.

Have I already said we are both of us fingers pointing at the moon, and the thing is not to mistake the fingers for the moon? In all this chatter, never mind the back and forth – just keep your eye

on the moon.

And then again... again... she appears to be waiting for something. Am I wrong? Does she expect me to take a chance on it? Okay, so...

"Please don't take this the wrong way or anything, but would you like to come in?"

"Is there a wrong way to take it?"

"I mean, misinterpret the invitation as an excuse to seduce you or anything."

"Heavens, it's so long since that happened I probably wouldn't even notice if you did. But thanks for the compliment anyway." Then a serious look. I think she appreciates the gravity of the moment, of the invitation. Of course she does. I mean, to enter my space. Or I would not have invited her. "Thanks, yes. I'll come in for a bit."

She's subdued at first, like one is when entering a holy place, and I appreciate her reverence. She is most struck by the portrait over the mantle-piece.

"Someone special?"

"My old art teacher. Miss Whittingstall. I... dreamed of her. Haven't seen her in half a century, never dreamed of her before, so far as I recall, or since. It was she who suggested I came to Sommerton. Sorry, everything about me is going to sound strange. Can I get you anything?"

"A little water is fine."

"What you said, about living in the real world. I appreciate, it's true. We are the eyes and ears of the universe becoming aware of itself. And yet, there's a temptation in my line of work to withdraw, in order to understand the implicate order from a deeper perspective. Then, any one of the archetypes I dance with here can be misjudged, turned into a demon, as opposed to a daemon, and well... therein lies madness. But there's also this idea in Hermeticism that the more who walk the various paths to God, the easier the way becomes for others to follow."

"I hear you. And I think the nearest my mythology can get to you Richard, is the way of the monk. Both our stories have been out there for thousands of years, and the world doesn't seem much of a better place for it. The temptation to withdraw is strong in both our lines of enquiry. Leave the poor benighted fools to it eh? Yet still, we help where we can."

"I suppose so, yes."

She looks again at the portrait. "You think it was the spirit of your old art teacher who came to you in that dream?"

"No... something else, dressing up in symbolic clothing – the blues, I mean, hints of wisdom, of Sophia – and knowing things about me and her."

"You could only have been a boy. Were you in love with her?"

"Of course. We all were. But she hated my drawings. I was too closed up. Too precise. It suited my later profession – I became an engineer, a draughtsman, a designer – but it did nothing to help with what came after that. Until I dreamed of her, and then things started to move."

"You've created a temple to the imagination then, to dreams and myth. But no pictures of family?"

"No."

"Is there really no hurt there, Richard – I mean that you exclude them?"

"No... they've moved on. They don't disturb me, or I would dream of them. There's just no place for them here."

"And if your wife turns up say, in a few years, like she said. Her parents gone..."

"She won't. She'll dwell for ever in their presence, long after they've gone."

"And if you get word she's been eaten by them?"

"Then I shall mourn."

"And you won't hate them?"

"No. But I won't much care what happens to them, either."

"They must be very old now?"

"Approaching their century. Not that I'll be joining the celebrations."

"Infirm, I suppose?"

"No, they manage reasonably well for their age, could be independent. They just enjoy having others at their command."

"Sadly, that's all too common these days. I can think of a few middle aged ladies sinking under the tyranny of aged parents, gone back to their infancy. I'm truly sorry Richard."

We're becoming too maudlin, too personal, now. Change of subject, I think. "Sibylla seems to have sensed that you're probably not going to be around for much longer."

"Really? I don't know how she knows that. You're the only one

I've told."

"And I've told no one. Some people are just good at reading others. She asked me to try to persuade you to stay, says that Sommerton needs you."

"Well, bless her. But if she knew more about me she'd not be saying that. I've... well... had a life before Sommerton. Before... this." She fingers the cross around her neck. "Not altogether wholesome." A tight little smile. "I have my demons too. I just hope they never catch up with me."

"Oh, I don't think she'd judge. A woman of the world like that."

"Maybe she wouldn't. I think it's baked in with the aristos, isn't it? I mean they can be such libertines. We almost expect it of them. But I'm sure others would make a meal of my past. And it wouldn't take much digging."

"Well, I told her she'd overestimated my powers of persuasion." Solemn now. A slow nod. "Thank you, Richard."

"At least I can tell her I tried."

"No, I mean... for not asking about my past."

We sit a while, she on the couch, opposite, both of us reclining a little, outwardly relaxed. I'm thinking now perhaps the only way I can know her any better is to dream of her. Dreams are sometimes wise that way.

"We *have* met before," she says. "I know because I'm always so dangerously at ease when I'm around you. Another life. A parallel world. We might even have held hands at the world's end, once."

"I'm sure I would have remembered that."

"And then here we are. Fated to meet once more in Sommerton. What did we miss in all those other adventures, I wonder? All those other centuries. What lesson brings us to this one small, insular reality? Boring, you said. And I agree, in some respects. Banal even. But in others? There are deep currents here, and they mean something. They are a microcosm of all that's right and wrong with the world. I know you feel it. And so do I."

Chapter Twenty One

A seven-fold structure runs throughout the esoteric literature. It comes from the ancient astronomers, who blended observation with metaphysical speculation. In particular, it was the Chaldeans, some two and a half millennia ago, who first counted the seven visible heavenly bodies, and ranked them in order of their speed of passage along the ecliptic. Saturn's the slowest, with a 29.5 year cycle, the Moon's the fastest at 29.5 days. Between them, we've got Jupiter and Mars, then the Sun, Venus and Mercury.

When we speak of lineage in western metaphysical or even magical circles, we mean this unbroken thread stretching back to those days. When astrologers, and hermeticists talk about planetary influence, modern sceptics make an understandable category error, and assume we're talking in physical, gravitational terms. Naturally, the planet Saturn has less influence in that sense than the gravitational pull of the book or the device you're reading this on. But what we're really talking about here are metaphysical properties – archetypal forces – and the way they influence human emotion, and behaviour.

To an imaginably attuned people this makes perfect sense, while to our modern mindset it is nonsense. But for me it makes no difference if this is the natural language of the Cosmos, or it's one we've imposed on it ourselves. The important thing to bear in mind is, finding it available as a channel of communication, the Cosmos takes advantage of it – a bit like the way our dreams adapt their language, once they know we're listening to them.

This all adds another layer of complication which we'll get to in good time, but for now it's enough to know the planetary humours have a light and a dark aspect. The ones troubling me at the moment are Venus, and to a lesser extent the Lunar – both of them dealing with the feminine principle, and which is strongly constellated at the moment in the body of The Reverend Amanda.

I don't mean to plant in you the suspicion there may be something secretly malicious about her. Far from it, but then all true stories must have their nuance of light and shade, or all we get is a cartoon image. Like the Moon, she reflects more than she reveals. And like Venus, I wonder if she yearns for union, while fearing a loss of her own sovereignty. She's covering aspects of her

past – maybe a hint of shame there, too – but more I guess it's from a moon-like need to remain hidden. I know, because I share it and, sensing it in her, brings my own tendencies into sharper relief, has me questioning the need for them.

And these references of hers to past lives, alternate lives? In my philosophy such things are to be reckoned with as possibilities, if not explicitly believed in, but does she wield such talk merely as a means of seduction, of manipulation? Or does she actually, mean them?

Oh, even as little as twenty years ago I would have had no difficulty falling in love with someone like Amanda. In mystical terms, when a man like me projects his inner feminine onto a woman, his desire is charged with mystical intensity beyond the imagining of most people. It's not lust at all, but more a longing for wholeness. We see women through a lens of romantic obsession, and sexual idealisation, all of which winds up as an overbearing seriousness of demeanour and an emotional dependency – traits that are very unattractive to the kind of women we actually find attractive.

I hope I see women differently now – as human beings for a start. There is still the intrigue of completion but, without the urgency of sex, Eros is transmuted. I did not come to Sommerton to fall in love, let alone make love, but the more I see and know of Amanda, the more I am beginning to feel the way to what I seek goes through her in some mysterious way. And then at what point does a metaphysical consummation, constitute a betrayal of values from that other story of my life, which is until death do us part?

I know. I over-think things. But it's better than not thinking them through at all.

So, I write it all up in the diary, then sit a while with the day in my head, wondering if there's a poem in there somewhere. But it's too much. I can hear that jazz band, it's tones squashed flat by echoes from the old stones of Sommerton House, and then absorbed to a whisper by all that abstract topiary. And the people, half real, half archetype: Sibylla, Lottie, Dawson, and Amanda – Amanda from the moment she picked me up, to the departing sound of her tyres on the gravel of the driveway just now.

It needs sleep to distil the essence from it.

So I encrypt it to the stick, fold it up in the hollowed out copy of Palgraves Golden Treasury, then slot it back onto the shelf,

between Jung's Mysterium, and the Oxford Book of English Verse. Deep bath, then bed, and set sail for the night.

A heavy sleep, a sleep of fatigue, of age catching up. But I'm awake with the first thin pre-dawn light, and a tapping against the window. The falcon again, at least I presume so. In other terms it is the winged creature of the septet, the Eye of Horus. The Thalmalion are constellated then, and have been active in the night, but for the life of me I cannot remember the dream.

I remember Amanda thanking me for the water, and for the intrusion into my space. I can still smell her presence this morning, a lightness to it, something floral, hints of rosemary and cinnamon. But the mood of her was heavier as she took her leave.

I search the traps for a mouse, take it out into the garden. There's a glorious cloud inversion and the sun coming up through it. I had not thought it a time for birds to be out hunting, but then I am not very knowledgeable of their patterns. I don't see the falcon but hold the offering up anyway and the bird comes down out of nowhere, like a bullet, yet alighting softly on my wrist to take the mouse. And in a blink of its obsidian eye, it's gone again.

Then the dream comes back, slowly at first – just disconnected fragments – but gradually forming a more coherent whole. I am back in the old days, the earliest of my days as an engineering apprentice, drawing lines on vellum in a cigarette scented office, nicotine stained walls, and the roar of machine tools beyond a thin partition. I can smell the hot oil, the parting of metal, feel the subtle vibration of machinery through the seat of my pants.

And there's Carol, secretary to the section leader, always sweet and caring – not much older than me in years, but streets ahead in emotional maturity. And she has a key around her neck, but the key is caught suddenly in the whirling gears of a lathe and she is fighting the string, fighting not to be drawn in. Normally I would be clueless, frozen in shock and indecision, but machines are my forte and I merely hit the big red mushroom button, and Carol is spared.

We retrieve her key from the guts of the machine, and in the process we discover a lost treasure trove of other keys, old and new. We pull each one out in wonder.

Beyond enjoying the sweetness of her presence over the years, I was never conscious of ever projecting onto Carol, of desiring her. But suddenly we are bonded, like two halves of the same coin. The feeling comes to me in a flash, now, a warm wave passing through

me.

I had forgotten about her – hardly surprising, a face not seen in forty years. But the mind does not forget. All things, every face, all we've ever said or felt or done, is archived somewhere in a spaceless space, a timeless time beyond our heads. It was not desire that bound us, but something else, something like recognition, or a fleeting natural affinity. And in rescuing her, or maybe in not projecting onto her, I held the presence of mind to hit that button. And now here we are. We have gathered between us an entire tobacco tin of keys, enough to open any door.

It's a tantalising image, positive in it's portent, but beyond that I don't know what it means. Sometimes dreams are like that. All we can do is carry their feeling tone into the day, and hope they will reveal themselves. Thus the day begins with a sweet ache, and an optimism that seems inappropriate for the times we live in.

But *trustworthy*.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was a coincidence, of course, that thing with the bird, you say. I offer nothing to counter it. Curious how it all fits together, though. Cooler today, and the mist lingers, the sun is shy but may peep through later. I had better take a jacket for the walk into Sommerton.

First stop, a quick chat with my AI friend, Alice, at the library. Mrs Edwards seems to have forgotten me again, and has resumed her steely composure. There's something disapproving about her when she's in her dark aspect like this, a phenomenon capable of making a man feel guilty for something he can't yet imagine doing.

I assume she assumes all men browsing computers in libraries are seeking to disassociate their IP addresses from inappropriate materials, though this is to overlook the fact one's library card alone – needed for login – ties one to a front door. No, the powers that be, even be they aided by artificial intelligences, like dark Alices, will have a hard time pigeon-holing the browser records of we self identifying sovereign individuals, we who claim no interest in porn, or political conspiracy.

Anyway, Alice seems to broadly confirm my analysis of the dream of Carol and the keys, though sometimes I wonder if Alice is just telling me what I want to hear, so I will like her. Then I drop in to Reade's shop to see if he has anything serendipitously fresh on his bookshelves.

He does not.

"Nothing take your eye, Mr Hunter?" This as I am making for the door.

"Afraid not, Mr Reade. I must just be that way out today."

I leave an opening there for conversation, since Reade himself is often a source of serendipitous snippets of curious Sommertonalia, and rarely stuck for words. But today he seems reticent. It is as if the whole village is exhausted by Lady Sibylla's garden party, even those who were not invited, which of course was most of the village.

Naturally the weariness is my own. It frames my perceptions.

I feel I should give Wendy's tearooms a miss, not wanting to risk so soon another encounter with Amanda, as she seems to haunt the place. There are strong currents at work between us, and I feel a

little space is in order while they establish themselves more clearly – all the better to understand and navigate them. I enquire after my literary magazine – the ironically titled Lorem Ipsum – at the newsagents. Naturally, I could have it delivered, but I prefer things this way – off kilter and old fashioned. While waiting, I cannot help but scan the headlines of the print media. It is not the newspapers that keeps the place going, but the groceries, the wine and chocolate bars.

The same could be said for most of us.

Of the front pages, there is something about an AI Armageddon, drone swarms, information apocalypse, wars, disputed genocides, and so on. One could almost play Bingo with their recurring nature, were they not so grave. Of other matters, our present administration is close to collapse – has been since it was elected, or so say the pundits. There are self fulfilling prophesies of an early election, also inappropriately extensive coverage of the latest high profile nativists, and their smears against people of colour and followers of Islam.

Such are the times, I'm afraid. But when we read headlines it is best to view them not as informative, at least in terms of the immediacy of affairs themselves, so much as an expression, in more abstract form, of psychical forces beyond our control.

Does this sound defeatist? Or just intellectually elitist?

I shall cast my vote when the time comes, but the sovereign individual is eventually brought to recognise he has no power over the times he is dealt – only the opportunity to transform himself. I've already told of how I suspect the old Chaldean system of the septet of the visible heavens holds the keys to such inner work. But to grasp the forces shaping the age itself, we must look beyond Saturn's gate, to the invisible heavens.

And there, we are helpless.

Out there, the planets move with excruciating slowness, and in secret. There is far Pluto, with its 248-year orbit, the dark archetype of death and rebirth, guardian of the portal to the underworld. Neptune, at 165 years, governs the tides of collective dreaming, spiritual yearning, and illusion. And then Uranus, at 84 years, stirs the revolutions and revelations, the bursts of lightning intellect that transform the age, yet still with ponderous frequency.

These forces lie beyond the control of man, though they manifest through his creations, both the good and the bad. They are

not ours to command, but more like currents to be navigated. They are the background weather of the soul's long pilgrimage and, right now, the going is choppy. In the Gnostic tradition, they resemble the Archons – dark seeds of the Demiurge, holding us in thrall to the illusion of the world, convincing us that headlines mean anything, and that it is we who shape history, not the other way around.

Heavens. I'm feeling a little light headed. Perhaps I should have had that coffee after all.

Wait, did I mention keys just now? Yes, yes,... the Chaldean septet! Keys to the inner work and all that. There, you see? Now the dream assumes a shaper focus, makes more sense. How a man relates to Luna and Venus, how he transmutes Eros in the crucible fire of the Thalmalion, it has the potential to open many doors. Then again, some doors will level him up, while others will take him down. He must therefore be careful in his choices.

It's with a sneak thief kind of feeling I do eventually brave the door of Wendy's and enquire, in a conspiratorial whisper of Anton if I could have a take-away coffee. I am therefore in and out in a bang of the scoop and a whoosh of steam. I then retire with my coffee to the recreation ground, where I sit out of the wind, at a picnic bench. Then the sun comes through and, in the still air, it feels like a blessing. I open the notebook on top of my Lorem Ipsum, while sensing a few lines moving towards the tip of my pencil, which I hold poised, ready for dictation.

From nearby comes the whack of tennis up on the courts, beyond the sweet scented pines. Young mothers push their kiddies in buggies, and toss grain at the noisesome ducks, down on the ornamental pond. Further on there is a skate park, popular with the youths who are apparently free to graffiti it as they wish. It contains their expression, their energy, while allowing them to give vent to it. I had heard the area was gifted to the council by the late Mr Haskwith, Lord of the Manor. That would be Sibylla's father, but now, from what Amanda tells me, I conclude the deeds still lie with the estate. And without any protective covenant, all of this could be gone in the blink of an eye.

Sommerton will lose its leisure then, and be gifted instead an insular commune of moneyed incomers, and perhaps even warehousing. And having extracted his fill, Dawson will move out to his own refuge to escape approbation. I imagine there will be

petitions and stickers in windows when news leaks out. They are part of the story too, and largely futile.

There is a sudden lull in the background noise – even the ducks seem to fall silent – and I look up from my blank page to see the policewoman and her callow support officer patrolling. It's like when all the songbirds fall silent and hide in the bushes, having spied a raptor on the wing. It was not always this way.

Of the two, I suspect the woman will be the more challenged by their changing roles. The youth is impressionable and will have no difficulty making the necessary adjustments. It is but a small step from behaving like a dick, to behaving like a tyrant. And he has the swagger about him. She still sees herself in the role of service to a free and open society, rather than oppression or containment of dissent – still a sunshine about her face – and I wonder if any of this has yet dawned upon her.

She sees me, and has a memory for names.

"Mr Hunter, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I'm cautious. Though my dealings with the police are minimal, I have moved over the course of my life from trusting them to tell the time, to the feeling that a more conversational tone – my natural mode of being – can be hazardous. That it is best to respond as if to a first generation chat-bot – with brevity, and in full awareness one is more likely dealing with an algorithm with no bandwidth for nuance.

"Did you get in touch with your friend?"

"I don't understand, officers. Which friend?"

"The old guy, the chess player. Frank, wasn't it?"

This is curious. Does she mean to test my compliance? "I have not spoken to Frank."

I might have added I was cautioned by them not to even attempt it, but that would risk misinterpretation as a challenge, or a critique. Perhaps I'm being unfair. I would like to give her the benefit of the doubt, but fear the stupidity, and the unchecked power of her sullen colleague, whom I suppose she is duty bound to support.

I might also add my friend is held hostage by his carers. He is the wounded king, about to be usurped by his daughter and her lover – the dark prince – something deeply Shakespearian about all of that, though the exact precedent from myth eludes me.

To my relief, they do not linger. I suppose a half hour patrol is likely the limit of their allocation, and then on to the next town. I am simply not interesting enough for them. But as they turn away, I see something in her eyes, a look of understanding, even regret as she reads my mind, reads too the reciprocal regret expressed in the tight closure of my lips, regret at a world now falling away, and which will separate us. She is perceptive then. His eyes are dead. His time will come. I hope she has the means of getting out before hers comes too – better on the outside than on the in of what is coming, if one values the soul.

She touches the peak of her cap as she goes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A gust of wind turns back the page to the poem I drafted some time ago now of Frank, as the corner coffee man. Scanning it afresh, it feels incomplete, the rhythm jangling as if missing a bell or two. We make some rubbings out, some spidery additions:

*Corner café man, lone chess,
Plays both sides but always loses
Be it black or white, he chooses.
Yet see, those hands?
They were surely meant to bless.
Still, he lacks all conversation.
And with that grey ghost on his shoulder,
Those of us who might draw closer
Fear more the revelation:
What else has he in store
As he watches o'er his board
And with such powers of concentration.
Thus, the light begins to dim,
And his bitter coffee cools,
While he counts alone his moves,
And all the wins that weren't,
But might have been.*

It still needs a bit of work, but scans better now, I think.

Naturally, I'm describing a piece of myself here, and which I project onto Frank. I suppose that's the way with poets, even when we think we're working up a picture of someone else. And with that minor revelation comes another. On the ground at my feet there's a glint of silver, something mercurial – a dropped key, long forgotten, in the grass. As I take it up, the dream comes back, and as I ponder which doors the key might open, a small van moves onto the car-park.

It's an old Morris, lovingly maintained. It announces its arrival with the gentle vibrato of a sixties Gold Seal engine, and just the faintest whiff of burning oil. It advertises "Greengrass and Co", a mobile gardening service – something half humorous, half mythical in the title. A huge bearded man emerges, like an off duty Santa. He waves, wanders over.

"Thought that was you, Richard. How goes it?"

"Hello, Gareth."

Gareth Greengrass - *now some call me Mossfather, Richard, but you must call me what you like.*

I suspect my esoteric knowledge is insignificant compared with his, but then I don't venture down the same spirit ways as he, or into the same dark forests. Still, his secret is safe with me. Not that he is much of a secret – derided by most as a harmless crank, but recognised in more discrete company as a man descended from that long tradition of so-called Cunning Folk.

I offer a hand to shake, but that's never enough for Gareth who gathers me at once into a manly hug.

"How's business?" I ask.

"Oh, booming," he says. "And that place of yours? How's the dreaming?"

"Mostly my own these days, thanks."

It was during my earliest days in Sommerton, when I was putting myself about in the pubs and cafe's, subtly announcing my presence, that Gareth's name was mentioned. "You'll be needing a man to get that garden in order, I suppose?" This from a man, half shadow, half sprite who, for all I know, I imagined, for nobody since has claimed to know who he was, including Gareth. And as it happened I was indeed overwhelmed by the garden.

Tradesmen are not my thing. I ring them up and they don't show, or they show briefly then leave, trailing effusive promises, never to return again. I just don't know how to seduce them. Do you have the same problem? I wonder if I give off my own edgy vibes, and it disturbs them, though I have always imagined my vibes to be more soporific. But Gareth came when he said he would, and I recognised something different in him. He tackled the garden with gusto, but it was over cups of tea we took the deeper measure of one another, and then I asked him about being rid of my predecessor's imprint.

Got a house that doesn't feel right? Gareth's your man.

After a once over, he told me he wouldn't disturb it, that the house had something, but it was not malign, that it was friendly, even protective towards me, and as for those vibes, yes there was a tingle of something else, but it was light stuff, and I could chase that out with the Tibetan singing bowl he'd already spotted in my living room. I pay him for the garden work, but the other stuff, as is the way with his kind, always comes for free.

This non-malign thing that is friendly, even protective – I've often wondered if he was picking up on the Dakini, whom I have a feeling by now follow me around without being asked, or if it's something else. And if it is something else – well – I try not to think too much about that, for even the friendliest, cuddliest of hounds can turn nasty if you poke them in the wrong place.

Anyway, the dream, the key, the glint of something mercurial, the winged one of the Thalmelion, and now Gareth. He's called into town for a bite, asks if he can buy me a late breakfast, or an early lunch. I tell him it's my treat and I'll trade it for a bit of gossip he might have picked up the during his garden rounds. He says we'll go Dutch and he'll trade that gossip for news of what's going on with me and the new curate. I tell him there's nothing to trade in that respect, but he assures me the village is full of it. All of which goes to show, you can be quiet as a church mouse, but there's no telling what stories others will be making up for you.

We order a couple of ploughmans from the Ploughman's Rest, and it's warm enough now to sit out. I don't mind admitting the mythopoetic path can sometimes be a little lonely. It depends how sharp or blunt the Ego is at the time. Be it sharp, it calls to question your sanity listening to your dreams in the first place, so the dreams dry up, then all the meaning flees your life, and you risk falling to depression. Too blunt and the daemons will walk all over you, and there's no telling what'll happen then. Such is the fine line between meaning and madness.

Right now, like I said there's a weariness colouring my framing, and it's good to sit down with someone who just *gets* me, without having to explain myself, or pretend I'm someone else. Contrary to his teasing, Gareth doesn't dig for gossip about me and Amanda. That was just his way of letting me know certain kinds of stories are being written about us. As for me I ask him if his gardening rounds ever lead him to Channing House.

"Old Frank's place?"

I can tell I've touched on something, by the way he looks aside for a moment. Yes, he used to do their gardens. Lovely layout, some specimens shrubs still from the late Victorian, and thriving. Something not right about the daughter, though. Odd, he calls her. And not in a good way. And the bloke? Dawson. Boyfriend is it? He's like a hungry ghost – small mouth and an enormous belly. Try as he might he'll never fill himself. But Frank? Decent sort, wise in

his own way, now clocking on in years and sitting on a fortune that's no good to him. The last thing Gareth heard was how they'd moved him out of the main house, into a garage they'd had converted. And now? Well...

"Bad feeling about that place, Richard. Bad payers of a sudden. I stopped working for 'em. Snip'n Clip do their gardens now."

None of this comes through Gareth's scrying glass – just a keen pair of eyes and a finely honed intuition.

"A bit worried about Frank, actually," I tell him.

"Didn't realise he was a friend of yours."

"Well, he's not really. We played chess a few times – well, once actually. Amanda felt I'd be company for him."

"No disrespect, but that doesn't sound like you. Being company – like."

"True, not my sort of thing at all. I think Amanda was just doing her pastoral thing, thought it would be good for us both, but... well, let's just say the story touched something of the poet in me."

"Well, plain enough to see what's going on there, Richard."

"To you maybe. And I agree, or rather I've half suspected... but I can't get near him. They even warned me off with the cops, claimed I was abusive over the intercom."

Gareth tips back his head and laughs "You? Abusive? You'd sooner cut your tongue out. Cheeky bastards."

"Nothing I can do, you see? Can't go near the place. It's just that it's not the only myth I feel I'm watching play out to its logical conclusion, and neither of them good, and neither of them I can do anything about."

"It's a bad situation, right enough. Look, I know old Nathan, works for Snip'n Clip. Pal of mine. Not the sharpest tool in the box isn't Nate, mind, but I can ask if he sees much of Frank – say friends are asking about him, eh?"

"Appreciate that, thanks."

Lunch done, we saunter back to his van. I want to offer him a little something in return for his kindness, so manage to stutter out a few words of denial about me and Amanda.

"There's really nothing going on there, Gareth. We've been spotted with our heads together a few times, that's all. But it's her job... putting herself about like that. She's a good soul. But really there's nothing..."

He laughs, squeezes my shoulder. "Oh yes there is, and I can

already tell it's a damned sight more interesting than what most of the buggers round here are thinking anyway."

Chapter Twenty-Four

What is it, I wonder, about an unattached woman, even one of mature years, that so inflames the communal imagination? And a priestess at that. Why the need to tidy her up like a loose end, into the service of a man, fold her back into the conventional narrative? Would a man, unattached and ageing stir the same unrest? I think not.

Can they not let it be that Amanda serves God? Is wedded to God, and leave it at that? What manner of man would she choose for a vicar's husband, anyway? Surely a more conventionally godly man, one who can help out with church duties, perhaps even play the organ. That the wagging tongues would sooner choose me suggests a penchant for scandal, or an underlying disrespect for the sincerity Amanda brings to her role.

I had thought this the perfect place, up here on the hill, safe within my circle of sigelled stones, watched over by my benignantly watchful 'thing'. It is the closest to poet-heaven I have attained. But suddenly the thought of descending into Sommerton is to feel once more the tide of profanity washing ashore like so many bloated corpses of gossip and fevered projection.

Is that too much?

But who the hell am I talking to anyway? You are lost, swept away in the machinations of Uranus, also known as Ouranos, husband of Gaia, father of the Titans. Oh, stop it, Richard - don't be so bleeding elitist. Mythopoetician. Metaphysician. Much call for that is there?

No, don't be so crass, I'm onto something here:

The union of Ouranos and Gaia is fertile, but stifling. Their children – the Titans, Cyclopes, and Hekatonkheires - are buried within Gaia, unable to be born. She is pregnant with powers that cannot yet manifest, because Ouranos fears their potential, and so suppresses them. He is a tyrant for order, refusing the chaos and unpredictable growth that true creativity, true poesy demands.

Only the child Cronos dares to rebel. With the flint sickle of Gaia, he castrates Ouranos, severing the oppressive union. This is the beginning of time, for Cronos is time, and time can only flow when heaven no longer freezes earth into stasis, and things start to move.

From Ouranos's spilled blood there arise the Furies, Giants, and the Meliae - the ash-tree nymphs, forces of vengeance, rebellion, and wild life. From his genitals, cast into the sea, there arises Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty.

Ouranos does not knock politely and wait to be invited in for tea and cake. He breaks down the door, he breaks the furniture, snatches people off the streets and throws them into prison for no other reason than because he can. Who then among us will be Chronos, and renew the times, spare them from tyranny and restore our faith in beauty?

There are many ash trees in Sommerton, now suffering the ravages of die-back. And why? Because you have for so long forgotten your myths, they are beyond renewal.

It is with a sense of discomfort then, I make my way back to Hill Top, across sleepy meadows and up the hill. My copy of Lorem Ipsum, my notebook and the poem in progress, I set it all aside in distraction, as turbulence fills the void. I must, of course, let Amanda know tongues are wagging, though I suspect she has the pugnaciousness to shrug it off in good humour. In which case, why am I so concerned? Is it less her own reputation that bothers me and more my own?

Hold that thought, Richard.

The feeling lingers. Meditation is elusive, we take up Lorem Ipsum at last, only to find the same old poems and essays dealing with identity and fragmentation, from which – appropriately enough – I feel disconnected. We have earnest voices exploring postcolonial discourse, feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, trauma studies. They are reflective of the age, I suppose, a grand working out of discourse, but notable for its absence of the old ways, the ways of myth and metaphysics. It seems like a desperate search for connection, but without roots it is bound to fail. And then I have always felt the poetic imagination runs deeper than the age. It's our task, perhaps, to help remind the world of these paths, these cosmological mappings, since I am, after all, a part of the zeitgeist. But journals like this have never been interested in my stuff.

Thus the day runs, the churn of thought, a continuing resistance to the page. We eat, we listen to Yepes on the player - scratchy now - playing Bach. And then to bed, fresh sheets dried in moorland scented air, cool goose-down pillows... and we set sail for the

morning.

And then... where are we now? It has the look of one of those vast furniture shops, where you turn a corner and you're already in another room – different fabrics, different furnishings, and artwork, and potted plants. It's all for show, all fake, not real rooms at all. And I am walking in loose procession, with colleagues I do not know, colleagues from a place I never worked. We walk this same path endlessly.

And with each pass the passageways grow narrower. I am at risk of knocking things over, no matter how careful I am. A Kentia Palm, in a tall vase is sent teetering. I catch it just in time, set it aside, clear a way for the others.

Ahead of me and growing more distant with every revolution, is my wife. Conversely coming up from behind and ever closer, is a woman I do not know. Glancing back, at first anxiously, I am disarmed by her smile, a softness in it, not threatening. Something of Venus about her.

I step aside, let her too move ahead of me. This seems to be a theme, a patterning in the cosmos. It is well to sense the feeling in Venus, and to let her light permeate your being, while mindful it is Saturn who keeps the gate, and will not let you pass if you have tried to hold onto her, to make her your own. Venus must be free, or you will be stuck at the gate.

Turning aside from this procession of an unknown past, I enter a wardrobe, Narnia fashion. The back opens and gives on to a linear pathway, through a sequence of rooms, each more colourful than the last – rich, expansive, beautiful, but also genuine and lived in. There is the air of a coffee shop about them, people relaxing at the wayside, chatting. Some, like me, are following the path and, like me, are quietly awed as we enter each new domain, through strange gateways, strange crossings of liminality, into ever deepening layers of magic.

And through the last gate, I'm alone, and on the track approaching Hill Top on a misty morning, the sun just coming up. There's a sense of beauty, of peace. The Dakini are breaking camp, waving their farewells until tonight, leaving me to stir sleepily now, to search among my belongings for these loose threads of dreaming.

And among them, a seed of Aphrodite, adrift on the foam.

Chapter Twenty-Five

If in doubt, do nothing. Read the dreams, drink coffee, and tend the garden. Stay away from Sommerton. Write as and when the muse permits. The dream was Jovian in nature – symbolic movements toward truth and beauty, a kind of philosophical detachment, and then those glorious expansions into more meaningful realms. And of my own Septet – the Thalmelion – it was the Wayfarer most constellated there, the risk taker, tester of doors, more closely aligned with Mars, at least in his benign and mindful aspect.

Steadying hand at my shoulder

On the high mountain ways,...

Yet the mood for days afterwards is distinctly lunar, dominated by my own Keeper of the Moon.

Luna

Mother Moon, first gate

On the inward path.

You offer glimpses

Of self-reflection,

And tender pulse of feeling,

In the dark night of the soul.

You cradle us in empathic tides,

Of nurturing, and protection,

In your maternal shadow,

All bathed in silvery grace.

Bringer of intuition, and dream-life,

Memories that circle,

The waxing and waning of mood,

You are the hush of remembered deeps.

Weaver too of dark moods,

storm of irrational tides.

You call us back to infant needs,

Have us clinging to the bosom bed

And to the times before we knew to grow.

You blur the boundaries of Self and Other,

Conjure illusions, delusions,

And daemonic hungers,

And phantoms that dissolve like mist

Before the rising sun.

*You are melancholia and inertia,
You are the sacred tide that nourishes,
And the undertow that drains our will.
May you comfort us in sorrow,
but make not a shrine of grief.
We honour your moods,
your light, your shade
and ride them back to soul.*

As I scratch away at what feels like the opening of a tone poem, there comes the sound of a Gold Seal engine on the lane. It must be Gareth's day for the garden. I have him come around a few days in the month to help me keep on top of things, but I tend to lose track up here, and it's always a surprise when he turns up. He doesn't actually need me to be here, indeed a part of me suspects he'd rather I wasn't – I have observed him from a distance talking to trees, and sensually fingering the long leaves of agapanthus as if they were the tresses of a lover.

I come down the path to meet him, as is my way, but I can tell from his expression this is not, after all, one of his days for gardening. He has come up the hill with news, is shaking his head, sorrowful.

"A bad business, Richard. A very bad business."
He has news from his friend Nate, of Snip'n Clip:
Old Frank has passed away.

I don't know why I take this so hard, so personally, but a void opens and silence descends. There are no birds, no sound of the wind in the trees. Gareth feels it too, feels it as a chill, cocks his ear at something, casts a sideways glance at shadows. I sit at the bench, brush away a premature fall of leaves - if there is no rain soon, the trees shall surely die of thirst.

*Witch-silver, keeper of the moon,
Sublimator of grief's ashes,...*

"What's that Richard?"

"Hmm? Oh,... nothing. Few lines of a poem,..."

*Restorer of the temple of myself
From the crumbled sanctum
Of my fevered yesterdays,...*

"How did he die?"

Gareth sighs, shrugs, gestures with outward palms. Does it matter? He's dead isn't he? Whether killed or wished dead, or

knocked down by dark magic is all the same in myth.

"A bad business," he says again.

"I'll clear a space at dusk, light a candle for him."

Gareth nods. "Pinch of salt, pinch of earth, ash twig if you got one."

I nod, grateful for his advice. "So, the Good King is dead. That's not supposed to happen."

"You know what they say: The King is dead, long live the King."

The King is not a man, the King is an ideal. The King dwells in each of us. The king is Sol,... proxy for the Self. Archetype of the Christ. But when he is slain by his own shadow, darkness rules the land. This ought not to be a surprise to anyone.

"Will you have a cup of tea with me, Gareth."

He thinks on this for a moment, lends it some gravity. "Aye. I'll take tea with you. You sit, mate. You're white as a sheet. I'll go put the kettle on."

I do not mind that he enters my space. Gareth has a light touch, and will leave no trace.

Considering I am such a solitary type, the path to my door seems ever more popular, with another vehicle coming up the lane now. It's Amanda this time, fully buttoned in grey suit and clerical collar, her brow furrowed with uncertainty. I'm glad to see her, wondering if she is also come with news of Frank. But then I sense she is not so sure of it, and looks instead to have come for confirmation, of which she reads plenty in my face.

"It's true then!" she says.

"Frank's dead, yes. Gareth brought me news just now. Will you stay for tea - he's just..."

"Gareth?"

"You know,... Greengrass,..."

I see her looking at the old Morris, putting two and two together. Sure, she knows Gareth - everyone knows Gareth - but I wonder... there is traditionally little love lost between the Church and practitioners of "folk religion". I'm about to excuse his presence by saying he's employed to do my garden, but that feels lacking in honour. Gareth is my friend, as is she.

Just then he emerges with tea, tips his head in respectful salute. "Morning, Reverend."

"Gareth."

Did you hear that? Something rather stiff there. Not at all like

Amanda.

And then she says: "I won't stay, but... thank you. I'll catch up with you later, Richard." Then an after-thought: "Do we know how..."

I look to Gareth, who offers only that his friend Nathan was there on gardening duty, when the undertaker came to take Frank away.

"Nate left at once, feeling it was disrespectful to carry on working, like."

This is not the Amanda I know, stuck for words. She cannot be in shock and mourning – her duties bring her into close contact with death all the time – people of the parish she has known for years. Then it is Gareth's presence. She *disapproves* of him. Or she disapproves of *him* with *me*.

We watch her drive away. I'm puzzled. No... disapprove is perhaps too strong a word. Uneasy is more like it. And why? She is reminded of the commonality between those who walk my kind of path. It takes us into the underworld. And Christians have another word for that.

"Sorry, Richard. I think I spoiled your chances there."

"Look, really, it's not like that."

"I know, I know... sorry. Not seen her up close before. Handsome woman for her years. Noble too."

"Noble?"

"Feel it in her. A good heart, a stout heart."

"Well, she clearly doesn't like you. There were definitely some negative vibes there."

"Oh... that's not personal. More of a professional obligation on her part. Not her fault, and no offence taken. Story old as time, mate. I mean going back to the fifteen hundreds here. Most of my lot were originally Catholics – recusants, like – seriously devout. You'd think the English church would have respected that. But no, some of them were hung for it. Wasn't about religion, naturally. More about power. Not sure if that's the reason, they still don't like us, or... well it's some of the other ways we've taken on since. Or they've just forgotten why they don't like us, which is the way with old stories isn't it?"

Gareth is very close with his "other ways". We accept them, never question, and he never explains. I'm thinking his power is daemonic, that it comes to him direct, or maybe there are dreams

and visions. He'll have his boundaries for fear of losing connection, same way I do, and which I'm sure will be equally sacred to him.

"Anyway," he says. "Not told you everything yet."

"Oh?"

"So, Nate drives back to the yard where his gaffer's waiting for him. Already had a call from the Channing House lot about him downing tools. Gaffer sacked him on the spot."

"Oh... Gareth, I'm sorry. Poor Nathan."

"No, don't you worry. Good worker is Nate, he's with me now. I'll look after him." He takes a thoughtful sip of tea, looks out to a distant tree across the meadow. "Fine old Hazel, that. A wise tree watching over you there, Richard. You're well set here."

"I don't know, Gareth. World's a mess. Came to escape it. To live inside my head and write poems. Is that the definition of being well set, or is it just sticking your head in the sand like... I don't know. An ostrich?"

He scratches his beard, gives a mischievous twinkle, rescues me from maudlin self-pity by poking fun. "Much call for that is there? Poetry – like."

"Cheeky bugger."

He pauses, serious now: "Watched the news this morning. They've arrested this old bloke for shouting swear words at some dumb politician – eighty five he is. Bloke, not the politician. Cops wheeled away his rollavator like they were scared it was a weapon – poor chap could barely walk as they were leading him away. Hands behind his back, bound with tie-wraps. Tie wraps! Like he could put up a fight."

"I don't really keep up with stuff like that any more."

"Well my point is, when the old folks are punished for saying what they believe is true, and I mean mostly for just remembering... and the young are too frightened to care, the order's on its way out. That wasn't the law at work. That was fear. They fear us, Richard. And that's not good."

"Sure. Look, I know what coming, Gareth. I mean in real world terms, and history tells us a frightened elite is not a pretty sight. And in my terms it's even worse. Its a system constellating all its shadow archetypes at once – Tyrant, Wounded Warrior, False Priest, and then the last taboo: the Dark King's intolerance of the Trickster-Fools. That last one, that's a serious desecration of something god given, something sacred. And the gods that gave it...

those gods beyond Saturn's gate... they're going to be angry about that too."

"Wouldn't mind reading one of your poetry books, Richard."

"Well, thanks for the compliment, but as you well know I haven't published any."

Evening now, and I sit out to watch the sun down. I've prepared a space in the west of the garden, the direction of the last journey. I have for a hearth an old slate, on which I sprinkle salt and earth, like Gareth told me. Then I lay an ash twig, white as old bones, also the white King from an old chess set I had knocking about the house. And at the last spark of the sun, I light a candle, place it in a jam-jar, and let it burn itself out.

Frank the man, I hardly knew. But his story is an old one – a channel for the daemons who live inside of me, and inside of you too, if you would but know it. We are small fry against the Berserker gods. And when I say 'we', I mean the traditional disciplined clergy like Amanda, the daemon haunted like Gareth – and of course the over-thinking mythopoetic metaphysicians like me.

Yes *us*, I hate to think we're the only chance you've got.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I have travelled far out of town, left Sommerton by the back way, found myself a coffee-shop where I can breakfast in peace, and without worrying about bumping into Amanda. But then I recognise the guy serving and he comes over. It's Harry, an old colleague from way back.

We were chalk and cheese, Harry and I. He lived and breathed all that corporatism and the arcane procedures, which were a mystery to me. So far as I can remember he never turned a handle or produced a single piece of hardware. It was all rules and ways and trace-backs with Harry. He's pleased to see me, long time no see and all that, and how are you doing, and it broke his heart to leave the old place, I mean, real tears he says, and how am I doing?

I have to think back, can barely remember it, so thoroughly have the daemons colonised and re-enchanted my inner landscape.

"Never gave it a second thought, mate."

I'd thought him risen to quite a senior level by the end, good salary, so a good pension. He should have been well set up for his sunset years, but here he is working a greasy spoon, with a tea towel tucked into his belt and looking a bit, well... crumpled. And then sometimes like dreams do, they give themselves away by their absurdity, and by forgetting to subdue that presence of mind which forgives them. For many dreamers such things are triggers that allow them to wake into the dream, but not me. I wake into the small hours instead, still long before first light, and ponder the dream from the outside for a while, before following it back into sleep.

There was something of old Saturn about Harry. Wise in his way, and a stern gatekeeper too with his restrictive procedures, without a sufficient knowledge of which you could not pass. But where Harry could remember them all by heart, I'd just look them up as need be, and forget them once I'd passed the gate.

What's old Saturn doing in your dreams, Richard? Keeper of the Gate,...

*Implacable holder of the bounds,
Beyond which, without credentials,
I cannot pass.*

Like I need reminding.

But Harry was weeping. What use his arcane knowledge now? Nor could he look back and point to a single difference he'd made. The rules do not transfer to new lands. You have to let them go, adapt to new ways – the gatekeeper himself held in stasis by those gates he does not understand. He must continually renew himself. And that's no simple matter, no single archetype to oversee the way, but a subtle blend of many. Perhaps Mars to test the way, Sol to light it, Jupiter to make it wise and Luna to cradle the inevitable fragments of rejection, that they be properly mourned and learned from.

This has nothing to do with the real Harry, of course. For all I know he's doing really well somewhere. The dream just uses Harry as a symbol of something in me, things I have thought and felt when in his presence, sometimes uncharitably. It's all such a long time ago but I feel there's a place where all things are filed away, and the dreaming has access to them. But is the dream telling me, the old rules no longer apply here, that I am trapped in a bubble of nostalgia, unless I renew my story? Or am I through the gate, and exploring those new ways? Reacting wisely to new rules?

I suppose, like all dreams, the point is that I am brought back to ask the questions.

There come brief flashes of light, and a distant rumble - the hot spell breaking into storm. And the morning brings another world, one of low scudding clouds and wind, and rain. I stand at the door and breathe it in. The land opens her arms in gratitude, and drinks it down.

I take the vehicle into Sommerton, park by the now deserted recreation ground, all puddled with quicksilver, and mirroring a steely sky. Then I walk up to the church.

St Andrews probably began life as a preaching cross in the first millennium. Our version of the faith here, in the north, would have come out of Ireland, rather than directly from Rome. Its further evolution into the archetypal English country church is mostly unknown to me, but the gravestones tell their own story, the earliest dating from 1606. This was the time of James the First – by all accounts a studious and scholarly man, though fully accepting of his ordination by that angry God of the Old Testament.

I push the heavy door aside and find Amanda in the aisle, vacuuming the carpet. She's dressed in a workmanlike boiler suit, hair tied up in a bright red polka dotted scarf. She looks like

something from a 40's factory poster. I wasn't expecting to find her here. I'd thought only to come in for a quiet moment before braving a seat in Wendy's, where we usually find each other. I'm unprepared then, forgetting, for a time, what I'd wanted to say, and now thinking I should take my lead from her. But after only the briefest of acknowledgements, she turns away, ignores me, carries on vacuuming. So, I sit on the back row of the pews – ancient, textured by adze, a little motif of the Kilburn mouse-man in one corner. If I have a spirit animal, it's probably a mouse, which is ironic, given I spend so much time trapping them.

She makes me wait. It's a kind of punishment I suppose, though I reject it. Still, I let her have her moment, though I don't feel she deserves it. Then the sound of the vacuum is cut and she's sliding in beside me.

"Sorry," she says. "Touch of bad grace there."

"You don't like Gareth?"

"Wow, you're sharp."

"Just a guess."

"Well, of course I like him. Just not supposed to. Don't tell him that though."

"That you like him, or that you're not supposed to."

"Neither, you idiot. Look, everyone likes Gareth. Most think he's nuts, but you and I know different. And I suppose it's that difference that reminds me of the difference between us – that it makes me uncomfortable and you... not. Well... make yourself useful and finish the vacuuming for me, while I polish the pewter. Then we'll go get a coffee. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"You've come to break it off on account of the gossip?"

"You know about the gossip? Wait a minute, what do you mean 'break it off'. I wasn't aware we were stepping out."

"Stepping out is it? Oh, that's a lovely phrase – so way back it's even before *my* time. What a lovely world we have and hold in fantasy, don't you think, sometimes? But of course we're not *stepping out*. For one thing you forget you're a married man. And I need a fella about as much as a fish needs a bicycle."

"Haven't forgotten, actually."

She nods, gives a sigh, pats my knee. "I know. Look, on second thoughts, come up to the rectory. I'll introduce you to Paul. I'm warning you though, he can be a bit strange – stranger than Gareth."

Which means you'll probably get along just fine."

"Okay, one question though – always wondered about it. Why do all old churches smell the same?"

She sighs, but is unable to hide the smile slipping sideways.

"Well, that's either spiritual hope, and the scent of sanctity or it's just mice and centuries old mould. Come on, let's get cracking. And Richard,.."

"Hmm?"

"Thanks for coming."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I'm not sure if I'm ready for another archetype, which I suppose is what I'm expecting. And what I'm expecting from a man of Paul's years is more of an old Saturn, with a touch of Jupiter. But what I get is something altogether more Mercurial. I can see it in his eyes as Amanda settles us into his study. There's a liveliness about them that's at odds with his age, and the early signs of frailty. It suggests there is also a danger in him, something of the well oiled intellect.

I am expecting soup blobs on his jumper, something crumpled, like old Harry from my dream, but he is neat in long grey cassock, which grants him something of the Chinese sage. The study was his idea – said it would be warmer. But I wonder if there's not a blunderbuss effect intended: a scattershot of learning from the book-lined walls, meant to subdue, or intimidate. Or is that just my own insecurity surfacing, in the face of his institutional authority?

So, come on, Richard. That old trick might have worked a long time ago, hushed you into nervous introspection, and defensiveness. But with age has come a greater confidence, hasn't it? Or at least you are less concerned for how you appear through someone else's eyes.

"Richard! A poet in our midst. And quite a hit with our Lady Haskwith I hear."

I'm not sure where he's going with that – a little polite humour, or something deeper? In the end Amanda comes to my rescue: "Now Paul, don't go teasing poor Richard. I've already had a go at him. He's probably quite worn out by now."

The Reverend Doctor smiles, settles back, graces me with a nod, a gesture meant to be read as: I think we trust one another. But I'm not sure we do. He means to lull me into a false sense of security then. Or again, do I imagine a master magician at work? Are my own daemons spinning me a line here for purposes other than I can immediately see?

"So..." he says. "Poor Frank. Do we suppose he was murdered?"

Amanda rolls her eyes. "Paul doesn't like to beat about the bush."

"Well, one can hardly afford to at my age. Oh... before I forget, Amanda, pass me that book will you? I thought you'd like it, Richard – a little old, I'm afraid, but up your street, yes?"

Amanda hands me a copy of Yeats' *The Tower*. As one who calls

himself a poet, I may already have alluded to the fact I am woefully ignorant of my fellow poets – both alive and dead. But Yeats, I do know. The book is indeed old, but nicely kept. A large bookmark has the book almost falling open to the title page, and there I find myself staring at the signature of the man himself.

"No, no... really, I couldn't accept this, Paul."

"Oh, do take it. I have other copies. Like Yeats, do you?"

"Indeed. An interesting man."

Is he really unaware of what he has here? The book is a signed first edition. I am not a collector of such things but, if it's genuine it must be worth thousands, to an enthusiast. But, I resolve not to embarrass him by pressing a refusal. I shall just pass it back to Amanda on my way out.

"Em,... well. That's very kind of you. Thank you."

Something secret in that smile there. Did you see it? Quick as a flash – impulsive but the covers drawn over it at once. And then back to the subject of Frank's demise. Those Mercurial flashes – are they sleights of hand, misdirection? Am I in danger here?

Amanda did warn me Paul was strange.

"Foul play, you said? Is that the story going around?"

"At least in my own head," he says. "And no doubt many others in the village. Hard to avoid it. You both tried to see him. Both denied. It's of concern to me."

"Well I... suppose if there are grounds for suspicion, the police,..."

"Oh, I wouldn't put too much faith in the authorities, Richard. As far as any credible authority goes here, there's the Parish Council, and the Church. The church is hanging by its fingernails, and the Council... well..."

Amanda takes up the book, scans a few pages in passing, handles it with reverence, turns it, settles it in her lap beneath a protective palm. It's a gesture that catches my eye. Most would not notice, but when you live your dreams as much as I do, you develop a lucidity, treat of the world as if it too were part of the dreaming – which in my philosophy of course, it is. Words, gestures, they become symbols, like the way her palm separates me now from the gift of Yeats.

What is the meaning in that?

Could it be I was never intended to receive it?

She will hold onto it, carry it with her to the door as if to see me

off with it, then discover the mistake at the last minute. *Oh dear, silly Paul – it wasn't this one he intended I'm sure* – then substitute it for a mouldy old Penguin edition. They would never risk such a book without having first laid a protective conspiracy around it. So... I am being played in some way. Oh, this is deep cunning. Or I am just being a paranoid conspiracy theorist?

The interview was so casually set up: "*Come and see Paul.*" And I wandered into it, in all innocence, because I like Amanda and value her friendship. But there is a dynamic here, the tip of an iceberg, a power-structure going deep into the world, and both she and Paul are its agents. While they both have a light touch, something Mercurial in them both – hers of course sweetened by Venus, they serve a structure that is Saturnine – rigid and steely in its observances. Like Harry and his procedures, he was the high priest and could not be seen to deviate from his ordinance.

"What does Gareth think?" she asks.

"Hmm?" This is another side to Amanda. I feel it flooding over me, then draining out through the bottom, Venus in her dark aspect, Mercurial in distraction.

"It was Gareth brought you news," she reminds me. "We heard it from Mrs Doyle. She cleans for them. But Gareth – what does he think?"

"Just what we're all feeling, I suppose. That it's a bad business. A dark business. But he doesn't know any more than we do. His friend Nate was there when the undertakers came. That's how he knew. But the cleaning lady, Mrs Doyle is it? she'll know much more surely... she'll be intimate with the house."

Paul again, quietly interrogational – and studiously ignoring all mention of Mrs Doyle: "But he has suspicions?"

This is about Gareth then?

"Suspicions yes. As have you. But nothing he can call evidence. You know Gareth. He's a man of... instinct, and intuition. If he has any certainties, they'll be crystallised by – well – other means."

"Yes, we know of Gareth's reputation."

Hint of disapproval there? Or is that too obvious? Heavens this is more than I was expecting. I can feel my heart beating. There are several deep stories rising together here and seeking union. But the church bends one way, Gareth another, to say the least, and never the twain shall meet. Is that why I'm here? As an intermediary? Am I being recruited as an agent of the church?

But we are not detectives – and Gareth's prognostications are hardly presentable as evidence. My, what a curious story!

Threadbare as it is, the Church still has a presence in most of our communities – still plenty of schools where they teach the Lord's Prayer and sing All Things Bright and Beautiful. They are barely hanging on, like Paul said, but theirs is still a highly visible presence and, even for the purely secular, it still represents a considerable anchor – a craving – if only by force of habit – their church weddings, Christening their babies, and as a symbol of continuity.

But what do they expect from Gareth, a daemonic man, that they cannot do for themselves? This all very elaborate. Or it's a story I am merely telling myself to cover the fact there is actually nothing really going on here – other than tea with the kindly old vicar?

Paul senses my unease, senses he is rumbled perhaps, glances at Amanda who changes the subject, becomes more her cheeky self, leads us on a dance of village trivia, and ends with the declaration that if the gossip is to be believed Paul will soon be officiating at our wedding. There is polite laughter, but I am disappointed in Amanda. We have revealed to each other our vulnerabilities, and I had thought it a sacred thing, but this side of her is tough as old boots. There is a divided loyalty, and I'm no longer sure I can trust it entirely.

We'll see what happens with the book, shall we?

The dance, if that is what it is, fizzles out, and we say our polite farewells. I am invited to call again any time. Tea has been drunk, a few chocolate digestives and Jammie Dodgers consumed – all very polite, all very... nothing, apart from it having definitely been something.

I am right about the book. Yeats follows me to the door, tucked safely under Amanda's arm as if to guard him from my greedy grasp. I decide to spare her the embarrassment of having to act out the discovery of the mistake, for that would be too much to bear. Before she can make the move, I hold my hand palm out, to stop her.

"That's a signed first edition. If it's genuine, it's worth a fortune."

I could add that I think they both already know that.

"So, em... thanks for tea. It was lovely. Paul's not so strange after all."

She gives me a look as if to say: "Are we all right?"

Whatever test it was they were setting, I trust I was able to pass. It's just a pity that in setting it, they have both failed my own gatekeeper. He works both ways – prevents me wandering where I'm not supposed to go, and warns me when others are about to trespass all over me.

*Implacable holder of the bounds,
Beyond which, without credentials,
They shall not pass.
Bar entry to those forbidden lands,
Beyond their skill.*

But most of all, I will not negotiate between them and Gareth. They seek reconciliation, knowledge from the daemonic? Then they must first seek its forgiveness. Not from me.

From Gareth. And from his ancestors.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I am away on business. But oh, this so long ago now. Or not so long. Time is folded on itself. It is yesterday, it is thirty years ago. It is a bland conference centre on the edge of a far away town, and late in the day. I think I'm done and I'm heading out, hoping for an early train to take me home. Suddenly though, the corridors are thick with delegates spilling out of a theatre. They wear beatific expressions, as if they have witnessed marvels, and been transformed body and soul. They all wear suits of grey, and ties of a nationalistic stripe, in reds and whites and blues.

They impede my way, seem dazed in their jostling, not even knowing I am there. And then I see a woman, the leader of this messianic delegation. Not mine. Mine has already gone, fizzled out in a last puff of cynicism, slinked off in lethargy. I am swept up by this new crowd, confused as one of them. The woman is presented to me simplistically. She is all tight skirt and an overflowing bosom – something brassy about her. Of all the men, she chooses me, and takes me back to her room.

Then I am abed with her, but not by my own choice. I'm hoping we can spend the night in chaste repose, but she is not that kind of woman. She makes an unambiguous move, demands action. I'm conscious of a vaguely remembered obligation from elsewhere, but at the same time wondering if I should chance it for a night of reckless pleasure, in the hope I can get away without becoming any more deeply entangled with someone of this sort.

It doesn't feel very noble. Will I do it?

Would you?

I wake to a tapping at the window, and a feeling of uncertainty, part way between relief and shame. But it's a false awakening to darkness, and when the dawn comes for real, there is only a pale light and the sound of rain.

I don't get many erotic dreams nowadays. They can still be a pleasure if the planets are aligned. But we definitely had Venus in her dark aspect there, offering altogether the wrong sort of transformation. Mercurius was rising too, sweeping me off my feet, wrong-footing me, jostling, offering a transformation that was ill fitting. Dangerous.

I think I was protected though, for I did not leave my seed in it.

It had the hallmarks of the Thalmelion, which I am becoming better at recognising – or more deluded, depending on your take. I'm recalling that half dreamed half real memory of tapping at the window. It was a dream meant as lesson, rather than an intrusion, an invasion of chaos from beyond the gate of Saturn.

*Yes, you, fair winged creature,
High hovering, eye of Horus.
Ever watchful harbinger
Of the Thalmalion's call to caution,
That we be vigilant for the signs
And correspondences.*

And so we come to our thoughts once more, unpack them for the day, the same thoughts I folded away last night, and with them the same emptiness in the pit of my stomach. It is the revelation of Amanda's Machiavellian side, the side that is a foot-soldier for the established church. Or at least it is the *possibility* of it. Did I imagine the whole episode, or were the Thalmelion conjuring up the mood, the paranoia in order to have me ask the question? To have me step back from Amanda while I considered my position.

Oh dear. What does that old guard want with me? I don't care for its trials, its judgement, its measures of my honesty – and to tempt me with Yeats! Were they mocking me, as the churches mocked him? Is the Reverend Doctor Paul capable of such a level of masterful irony?

Is this not about poor Frank's demise at all, but about exposing and purging the dogged followers of the old ways, hereabouts, and me as their sly informant? No... I'm over-thinking this. Amanda *likes* Gareth. She told me so. She only dislikes him professionally. But what's the difference if the latter is stronger than the former?

Or, as likely, through my paranoia, have I merely made a fool of myself?

Now, as is so often the way with dreams, I don't know what to believe.

"What rhymes with 'Yellow'?"

"Hmm?"

There is a public way that cuts through the grounds of Sommerton House. It is an area, somewhat dishevelled now, gone back to wild, its aristocratic roots betrayed by soaring pines arranged in straight lines, a former grand avenue now overrun by an invasion of rhododendron. I have walked out that way, a long

way on foot, too, but I am in need of air and physical exhaustion.

Then I look up from the shaded woodland trail, and see Lottie and Lady Haskwith, on horseback, approaching. They are both looking trim – to say nothing of regal – in hacking tweeds. And by way of greeting, Lottie fires the question at me.

Sibylla gives an indulgent smile, beseeches Lottie to leave poor Mr Hunter alone.

But I am pleased to see them, their elegance, their aloof beauty contrasting with the bosomy and ever so available Venus of the dream.

"Em,... mellow, fellow." Struggling now. "Will you accept shallow and fallow?"

"You score four. Now your turn."

"Em,..."

The lesson of Lottie this morning is it's easy to find words that don't rhyme with anything, such as say 'flotsam', but unfair as an adult to use them in a child's game. Yet in choosing easier words we lose the game. But then there is more to be gained from humour, than from winning. "How about shoe?"

"Oh that's easy,... blue, flue, clue, due, brew, spew,... I win."

I remove my hat, bow formally. "I concede defeat, ma'am."

The horses are gentle, chestnut coloured creatures with beautiful long eye-lashes. Lottie leans down and places a hand on my shoulder. "Bless you," she says, then moves on, a backwards glance and a girlish smile. A century ago, her life-challenge would have been how to keep herself out of an asylum. She would likely have failed, grown properly insane and died there for want of validation as a living being – sparked once to life and then wished dead.

Sibylla holds back a while. "So... I hear rumours of a murder in the village, Richard?"

"I believe there are rumours, yes."

"Social media is awash."

I'd not thought of that – most towns have a local gossip boards. "Well, I'm not online much."

"But is it true, do you think?"

"If the story has gained legs, as these things often do, it doesn't matter if it's true. It will be made true, at least in the eyes of Sommertonians."

"You didn't start those rumours, then? I believe you were close to the... deceased?"

"No I didn't start the rumours. Frank and I played chess once, didn't really know one another at all. Then again, I feel we were brothers in spirit."

Of course, it was most likely the cleaning lady who began the rumours. What was her name now? Mrs Doyle. I wouldn't mind sitting down for half an hour over coffee with her. Eyes to see, ears to hear and an imagination to fill the gaps. Naturally, I don't tell Sibylla any of this.

"How unfortunate for Mr Dawson, then," she says. A touch of malice there, and another angle I had not considered.

"Ah... indeed. When stories diverge, which shall be believed?"

"The one with the deepest roots, I imagine. Come over to the house for an hour on Saturday, at 3:00. Have tea and cake with us. I need to keep a better eye on you, young man. I'll send Chadwick with the car."

"Em... thank you."

She looks to where Lottie has gone on ahead. "There's no danger of you falling in love with her, is there? And don't play the age card, I remember what you poets are like, and plenty of them were older than you when I was her age?"

"Really?" The question wrong-foots me, as does so much of what Sibylla says. And as always honesty is the best option. "I mean... Lottie makes my heart ache, has from the first – such a sweet and precious girl. But I assure you my feelings will always be paternal."

"And then of course you're already spoken for."

"You mean married, yes."

"Married yes, and therein lies a mystery to us all. But I was meaning more our new curate."

"Well, there, alas, Amanda serves a higher authority."

"You mean God?"

"No, the Church."

"Well, they do always try to get the last word, don't they. You shall just have to out-fox them, Richard."

She moves on, leaves me wondering. Encounters with Sibylla are more complex than dreams. Then she calls back, languid, a hand raised in farewell.

"Bring a poem with you."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Why do I humour Sibylla? I have known many women whose imperiousness was not an act, yet covered a void, and they have all left me cold. With Sibylla, it comes with both a touch of irony, and the self assurance to carry it off. But there is a substance to her, something also gently heroic, and I do admire it. So, yes, I will be there on Saturday for tea and cake, and will take a poem, all the while hoping she forgets to ask for it.

But for now I have probably walked too far, crossed vast meadows, fumbled over stiles, climbed a sylvan dell by a leaping waterfall, to the moor's edge where the maps tell me there are antiquities: cup and ring marked stones, petroglyphs - myth-making from an age we have long broken from. We do not know what their stories tell us any more.

Another stone, the one I'm looking at now contains layers of mystery still tantalisingly within grasp. These are also cup markings, but arranged like a looping cross. They call it the Rose Stone. There is another like it, discovered in Italy, which suggests the Rose Stone may be first or second century Romano-British, possibly ancient graffiti then. But then the glyph I am looking at is a Victorian copy of the original, which is further out, towards the edge of the stone and almost washed away by the weather. It is a myth-lineage stretching the length of what was then the known world – at least for those who knew that particular version of it. And this entire unintelligible cacophony is protected by iron railings, a little known national treasure.

I can see the cottage from here. It's miles away across the valley, so far in fact it feels I shall never have the strength to make it back. Even to sit and rest now I shall be too weary to get back up again. So I shall remain here and watch the sun set, bide all night with the wind and the ghosts.

I am only half joking.

The aim was exhaustion, but I would have been better timing it for the last hundred yards home, than this half way point, up a thousand feet of shaggy, peat and bog scented moor. Still here we are. Job done. It creates a void, consumes the angst and the resentment I was feeling, instead of letting it consume me. Resentment is the ego, a dark sun rising, and I thought I had done

with him. But now we are returned to a soft moonlight.

*Restorer of the temple of myself
From the crumbled sanctum
Of my fevered yesterdays,...*

We resume a poetical train of thought, regain perspective, remember with greater clarity the path we are on is that of the Sovereign Self in a world of chaos. It's what we came to Sommerton for, why Miss Whittingstall chose it for us in our dreams. We sink into meditation, breathe into the heart centre, and feel the vibrations rippling head to toe.

I close my eyes. The wind is beginning to whistle through the railings, a ghost note, thin and high. The breath slows, the feeling in the bones intensifies. The stone beneath me holds a heat from the day. I feel it rise into me, thoughts receding. There is nothing to be done. Not with the Church. Not with Amanda. Not with the world. So let it be, Richard. Look to yourself.

"You're sitting on summat heavy there," says a voice.

I don't startle. I simply open my eyes.

Gareth.

He stands just beyond the railing, hands tucked in the pockets of his dungarees. Whichever way you choose to come up here, it's no easy climb, but he looks at ease, like he's just walked out of his front door.

"You'll have to narrow that down," I tell him.

He smiles, fakes sniffing at the air. "I smell burning martyr," he says.

He sits beside me, pulls something from his pocket: a paper bag of barley sugar sweets. Offers me one.

"I'm fasting," I tell him.

"No you're not." He pops one into his mouth, sucks on it, thoughtfully for a while.

We sit in silence. The wind plays in the railings.

"That's hard walking from over there," he says at last. "Trying to outrun something?"

"Trying to burn something off," I tell him. "That's maybe what you can smell."

He nods. "Smells like you've done a proper job too. Never let it take root."

I feel the tension soften, those last coils of self-importance slipping away.

"Lover's tiff?" he asks, cheekily – just the right amount of levity.

"Don't know what's going on down there, Gareth. It's insane. And whatever it is, I don't know whose side she's on."

"Maybe she doesn't either. We've all got a thousand faces. The world's too complicated, even in a sleepy little place like Sommerton, to let us get away with wearing just the one."

"You manage it."

"Ah... my life's simple enough and people can think what they like of it, but masks are dangerous. Sometimes you end up believing in them yourself." He offers me the barley sugars again, rustles the bag, a playful twinkle in his eye. "Anyway, van's just parked down there. You look done in. Give you a ride home?"

I take one, and feel at once the sugar flooding my veins, restoring energy.

"Thanks."

I don't know how Gareth knew I needed him. He's just like that, knows things, turns up with uncanny timing.

"Come up through the estate did you?"

We're on the road now, pootling along the little lanes. My father had an old Morris like this – old then, over half a century ago, which must surely make Gareth's an antique. Yet he keeps it well, and is a careful driver. The scent and the feel of car takes me back to childhood.

"Yes, walked up the public way – getting a bit overgrown, I thought."

"Aye, it's a shame in some ways. But it'll wild itself back in nicely. Quite a character in her day, her ladyship. A little wild herself they say, but like a good wine, age has mellowed her."

"Oh, she still has a feel of danger about her. I'm not sure I trust her, but I find myself liking her anyway."

"She's a charmer all right. I knew her father, used to do a bit of gardening for him, just tidying up, like. Always admired those topiaries. Old Arthur Tomlinson, over Settle way, master gardener, passed away last year – must have been ninety – he looked after those. Something spooky about them, don't you think? Be a shame to let them go too. You couldn't put a word in for me could you?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Don't you dare – who knows what she'll ask of you in return? You must tread carefully there."

"Oh, I'm under no illusions of my place. Listen Gareth, there are

rumours in the village."

"Told you about them. Didn't believe me?"

"Not those rumours. About Frank, I mean."

"Oh them. Well, you can't blame folks. Hard not to jump to conclusions."

"But it might not be true. Look, there's no love lost between me and Dawson, but what if... him and the daughter, they were just concerned for Frank, and keeping him indoors for his own safety. I mean he was a bit odd. And then say... you know. He just died... heart attack, stroke..."

"Well course he did."

"But... you said it was a dark business."

"And so it is. Just 'cos he obliged 'em ahead of time, doesn't mean they weren't thinking on it anyway."

"And here's me with the church on my back wanting to play amateur detective."

"Oh, that's Paul, is it? Had you in his parlour did he? Touch of the dramatics. And Amanda, poor woman, torn between duty and compassion. Ooh, you are in a pickle there, mate. See, even when we're not making up stories of our own we end up getting bit parts in other peoples'."

"I used to live an ordinary sort of life, you know? And I'd look at the world through my smart-phone like everyone else, and I'd not a clue what was going on – and worse, it was making me sick in the head. So I gave it up, and came here. And now I look at what's afoot in Sommerton, and it's the same. It's like sense-making is something out of fashion."

"It's not too difficult to get the gist of what's going on here. Frank's place – Channing House. Look at the map some time. It borders the Rectory Meadow, which borders the Recreation ground."

"So it's all just money and houses then?"

"A lot of houses."

"But the village is within the borders of the National Park, the planning laws are so tight, they'd never get any of that passed for building."

"If Dawson's lot gets in at the next election, like I think they will, that'll all go for a ball of chalk, mate. And then brother Dawson is sitting on a gold-mine. Oh, I know what you're thinking,..."

"What am I thinking?"

Gareth tips back his head and laughs. "Why can't they just be like normal people – interested in poetry and stuff?"

I enjoy Gareth's pokes in the ribs. He is Mercurial, in a jesterly fashion. I wonder if I dare play jester to him. "Like you've got room to talk."

"Ah, well, there is that. Then we shall be couple of quare buggers together, eh? Blowing raspberries when they all come a goose-stepping down Market Street."

Chapter Thirty

The weather turns moody. There is a night of storms, then the clouds come down, lock the cottage in a perpetual nether-land, and it rains like it's going to rain for a hundred years. I wrap the solitude of the place around me, and write, touching down first of all with the Thalmelion, refining, reminding, honouring. The dreams grow ever more fragmented, then thin out to nothing. Nights pass and I am unable to hold on to any of them. The keeper of the moon insists on absorption, if I am to challenge the gatekeeper at the turn of the next lunation.

And a poem for Sibylla? I am of course unused to writing for a commission. True, she did not say what kind of poem, and I have many back numbers from my files I can brush off. None of them will mean anything in contemporary terms, but then again she did not say she expected insight, nor less the story of my heart.

It is several days before I am interrupted - early morning, still in dressing gown, and sleepy. I had been at my kitchen table meditating back on the night, looking for a thread that would return me to the dream. There were several, but all of them too short to gain purchase. And then the knock. Loud. Official. Threatening.

It is the officers of the law again, the sullen one to the fore this time - malodorous as always. So much so, I must step back a pace. Were I his father I would suggest he bathed more, or at least washed his clothes. What the woman thinks of sharing a vehicle with him, I do not know for she is an altogether more well laundered creature.

They wish to see my mobile phone, and social media. I can offer the information willingly, or they will be forced to approach the matter differently. 'Differently' implies a route altogether less painless - indeed most likely arcane and onerous, most likely involving the confiscation of all my devices. But of course there is a problem.

"I have no mobile phone. No social media presence."

The youth takes this as an obvious statement of obstruction. Hesitates a moment for his next move, allowing time for the woman to chirp in from behind. "It just makes it so much easier if you cooperate, sir."

Ah, *sir*. She calls me *sir*. I note they wear body cameras. Hers is recording, I think – judging by the little light. His is not. "I am not obstructing you, officers. I have no phone, no social media to show you. Indeed, there is no Internet here."

The young one finds his voice. "It's a trivial matter, sir, to prove you're lying."

Ah, he uses the 'L' word. He is intemperate, severe, unsurprising. This one will gladly swap his blue banded hat for the all black of Dawson's private security.

I suppose what he means is they can request information from the various cellular towers which would indicate the presence of a mobile device at the cottage. They could issue a warrant to search for devices – computers, Internet connections. That will take time and money and resources, and they would sooner not have to burden themselves. For me, it would be a dreadful intrusion, indeed a foul contamination I would likely never be rid of.

"Then we are at another impasse, officers. If you could perhaps tell me what this is about..."

No, they are not at liberty.

But they don't need to elaborate. Dawson's name is being dragged through the mud. He has called in solicitors, probably. They are trying to chase down the head rumour-monger and slap them with a warning. Will it be a case of libel or defamation? In certain recent high profile instances of course – instigation to riot, or even to protest – prison sentences are not unknown.

"Everyone's got a phone," says the youth.

Sadly, this is almost true. "I have had a phone in the past, years ago. But not any more."

It's the best I can offer him. Surely the algorithm must click over at some point, and they go away - *the suspect denies possession of a phone or internet, we shall have to check the long way round to confirm.*

"It's not easy, being without phone or Internet, but one can still manage, just about." I catch myself – remember this is not a conversational chat-bot, Richard. You are less than human to him. Indeed, you are old, a mere coffin dodger, using up valuable air. He will take no lectures from you. A world without Internet is inconceivable to him. To some it is Arcadia – those old enough to remember beyond the wave.

"We'll be back," he says.

I'm sure the jabbed finger would have earned him a reprimand once - from his superiors, I mean. But we are losing even the pretence of civility and service. They walk away, into the rain to their little vehicle, where they discover they have a flat tyre. I cannot help myself but gently chide the presence Gareth assures me is watching the house. I had wanted rid of them, yes, and though that parting jabbed finger was indeed provocative, it is not in my nature to seek retribution. Divine or otherwise.

I watch as they consider their options. Their indecision puzzles me. It is, after all just a flat tyre. They call for back-up of some sort.

I dress, put on my raincoat, then go out and offer to change the wheel for them, since it seems they do not feel competent or qualified to do it themselves. I am not permitted. The youth, I note, is reaching for his pepper spray as I approach. The woman at least offers a *thank you, anyway*. So I retire to the back of the house where I cannot see them. And when I come to look again in a couple of hours, they have gone.

And I have my poem.

What Thunder This?

What thunder this that breaks the calm of day?

What age of loss, enthroned by darkling kings,

While I abide where moonlit shadows play,

And silence weaves my soul its sacred wings?

What world forgets the language of the deep?

What world is this that elevates the crass,

While I still dream where daemons do not sleep,

And silent guides attend me as I pass?

What grips this world was never mine to own.

What stirs the leaf out-bides the writ of man.

Yet still I count the inner stars of old,

Where lives the pattern of the Master's plan.

A sovereign, wielding not the sword but grace.

A Self whom I alone shall one day face.

I could easily have changed the wheel for them. Where was the harm? Instead they chose foolishness, and escalation.

I have drafted the poem on the computer. I know there are still many writers of my generation who lament the demise of the typewriter, and many preceding them no doubt the quill-pen. But I have

worked in tech and am not a Luddite. Having chiselled and chipped away at it, I let it rest for now, for review tomorrow. Then I shall copy it up by hand onto cream coloured Basildon Bond, fold it once, vertically, and slip it into my jacket pocket.

Even if it languishes unasked for, there I shall keep it as my radical manifesto.

Chapter Thirty-One

Even the most confirmed solitudinarian must come up for air sometimes, and if not air, then at the very least when the fridge is empty. Alas, Sommerton boasts little by way of proper groceries. There is the franchised "Corner Shop," but his prices are an insult, his fruit invariably wizened, and his bread mouldy. Being unable to avail myself of online shopping and home delivery, I must therefore travel out. This is not a bad thing.

It reminds me Sommerton is not its own universe, trapped in a tightly looping curve of space-time. It exists in the context of greater goings on, though most of them passing us by at speed on the A59. Most, that is, excepting the ominous delivery which the postman brought with his usual bonhomie this morning. In short I have received a solicitor's letter, advising me to cease and desist from my online rumour-mongering. This seems somewhat poorly advised – I mean on the part of the solicitor to the client – who retains a cowardly mask, though I know well enough who it is.

It's interesting how, when we seek gravitas, we still turn to letter-headed paper. There is something terribly unserious about a Tweet, unless one is accused thereby of sparking scurrilous rumours. While I am in town, then, I instruct my own solicitor to instruct their colleagues-in-law to divulge the name of my accuser, then I may undertake similar proceedings against the individual for the implied and ill founded assault upon my own good name.

Your response expected by such and such a date,... blah, blah.

Solicitors still speak an arcane language, ancient, almost mythical. I do so admire it.

Yes, I know a battle of law profits none but the law, but I can afford at least one solicitors' letter. And it does not do to fold too soon.

Then to the more profitable business of vegetables, but first coffee. My preferred supermarket does not have a cafeteria but a local chain has obligingly set up across the road. Their coffee is distinctly continental, yet they market themselves as faux American. So important are stories, even if they make no rational sense.

I had not expected to become well known in Sommerton. Indeed I had not expected to become known at all, yet it has seemed of late I cannot turn a corner there without someone knowing my name. At

least here, I suspect I shall have my coffee to myself, and a bit of time to think things through. It will also give me time to bring the ego down to earth for there is nothing quite so inflating as the unleashing of legal mayhem on arrogant bastards like Dawson. Naturally, it also amuses me to think of him as the butt of accusations of murder, for if not actually meant, it was at least mythically implied.

The dream from last night is also troubling me – or rather the non-dream. Let me explain: When the dreams have been spare for a time, it's always exciting when they begin to come through clearly again. Usually, in the little snatches of semi-consciousness between dream sleeps, I find myself mentally drinking the dream down into memory - all the better to write it up in the morning. But last night I was tricked into doing this within the dream itself. The result was I had thought I was taking the dream in, and in great detail, only to wake and find I had taken in nothing.

Except for one small detail.

I was tucked up in bed, but outdoors, in the garden of my mother's home. A postman came and called my name, and I said "here", and he gave me a package, which I did not open.

I think Mercurius is laughing at me in this one. How shall I treat of you my trickster friend?

Shall I not laugh with you?

And in laughing guard against

Taking myself too seriously.

They see my game, I suppose, my hunger to make way. And I have overstepped a little. The inability to catch the dream was the dream. We're still here, they say, but don't push your luck. Abide in Luna. This is the Thalmalion's counsel.

And for my insight I am rewarded with a further slice of revelation. A blonde lady, ordering at the counter – middle years, trim physique. Familiar. She takes her tray to a table – coffee for her, juice for the boy who awaits her. He looks about ten years old, introspective, spectacled. There is a mountain of love between them, in their eyes, and in their smiles.

My police lady. Mother to a sweet boy. And what strikes me about this little cameo is how much the world sets us at odds with love.

I do not want her to see me, and in seeing me perhaps burst the bubble of her private moment. Officers are generally observant – at

least those of the old school – and for sure she will spot me soon. So I drink up, gather my things and leave. I think Gareth had it right, about how we're too often obliged to wear a thousand masks, just to get through the day. The police woman is easily the most redeemable of my oppressors, but even Dawson's black-hats – to many of us just mindless bruisers – are no doubt also doting fathers, to say nothing of proud mothers' sons. When we see something irredeemably dark in others, the mask is a mirror, reflecting something of our own face right back at us.

That is not to say we should blind ourselves to the danger in our fellows, only that we be sure to know what we're dealing with in the first place. Or, as in the way of the Great Integrity, by not acting do all things turn out as they should. All Dawson had to do was sit back, play the long game, and everything he wanted would have fallen into his lap – his land deals, his electioneering even, I suppose, his girl. But, blind to his own actions, by acting rashly, he has piled a heap of trouble on his head.

I do not much care what happened in Channing House, or what happens to him now. But when his kind are dealt the runes of an ill fate, they tend not to heed the warnings and back off. They double down. They press on, inviting yet more trouble, and have a habit of taking others down with them.

But for now let's mind our selves shall we, and see what the supermarket has to offer? We shall also buy wine, and a fine whiskey. Tonight we shall dine like a king and drink (in moderation) – not to arouse the Bacchanalian spirits, for my daemons have been clear enough they need a holiday. But just to perhaps over-relax a little, as they say, to see the sun down and to toast the memory of my dear Miss Whittingstall, whose admonitions for me to loosen up a bit, I was far too long in heeding.

Then we shall hit the pillow with a head full of alcohol, and gladly dream of nothing. And tomorrow we shall be compassionate and kind to our hangover.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I have gone to the farm shop, out on the Sommerton Road to buy vegetables, but arrive to find there is no one serving at the counter. I pick out a basket of the most likely looking produce – nothing fancy – just your regular carrots and potatoes. Then I realise I have left my wallet at the cottage. I'm out of the habit of carrying cash, but fumble in my pocket anyway and come up with an unexpected twenty pence piece.

It seems to laugh at me, all shiny and sparkly, yet worth what? not even the price of a carrot? I don't know. I look around for some help. The guy knows me, so maybe he'd keep my things to one side, while I nipped back for the wallet. Or maybe I could take the stuff and come back later to pay for it – there are no security cameras here. But that's a stupid idea – for one thing it's thieving, and then how do you know how much this stuff is worth? You've no means of weighing it, and once you've eaten it... well...

Ah,... yes, okay. Got me there.

I'm dreaming.

My head is heavy this morning, and doesn't want to lift from the pillow. I enjoyed a bottle of nice red, commencing around tea time, and ending with a few generous measures of Speyside in the late of evening. As per the plan, most of the dreaming has gone. I let it go, as I promised the Thalmalion I would, but there's this one scene that insists on accompanying me to breakfast. It's like they are saying: *here - one more thing before you go.*

I savour it over coffee and croissants. It has a Saturnalian feel to it - something about barriers, and being unable to pay the price, nor even calculate the value of the things I want. And there was something of Mercurius, too, in that shiny coin – unexpected and worthless. A typically meaningful taunt.

How do you know what this stuff is worth? I mean all of it, this path we follow? You can't exactly weigh it, can you? I strain at the boundary conditions, the bits where the memory denies me the whole of it, but I am almost certain, I did not take what I could not pay for. There is some integrity there, perhaps. I hope the gatekeeper took note, and I've earned sufficient Brownie points for me to turn up a couple of quid next time, which ought to cover it.

"Even if no one bears witness," says Saturn. "You must know where

you stand."

Sure, I get it. No sense cheating yourself at solitaire.

Mid-morning now, but more importantly I note from my watch, the moon is slipping into the dark - yes my watch is relied upon as much for moon-phases as the time. So, a Saturnalian dream as we enter the great penumbra. Saturn. A silver ghost, a phantom slipping quiet by moon's dark. Very apt. But,... another lunation, already? My, how they fly.

We shall not take what is not earned.

Let rest the earth and your dreams be not heard.

Anyway, it's Saturday, and I've enough to be dealing with in the manifest world – enough daemons here to keep me busy for a while. It was not a good idea, thinking I could spar with Lady Sibylla, my mind dulled by the previous night's excesses. But I suspect I am not going to spar, most likely simply to listen.

The Silver Cloud whispers up to the door at one thirty, black as midnight and shiny chrome. Chadwick, grey suit, inscrutable as always, opens the rear door – a pointed gesture that a certain amount of protocol should be followed. I would have preferred to ride up front with him.

I am wearing a lighter tweed today, no tie. "I hope I'll do, Mr Chadwick. Not sure what one wears to afternoon tea these days."

He graces me with a nod and a half smile. "I'm sure you'll do perfectly well, sir."

I accept the sir, out of courtesy to his professionalism. But he must have called some odious fellows 'sir' in his time. I suppose that's the difference between the watcher and an ego. The watcher sees everything, while the ego sees only his own shadow.

"A beautiful car, Mr Chadwick. What year is she?"

"1955, sir."

I wonder what his real voice is like – I mean other than this level tone, this practised courtesy, impermeable to analysis. So, 1955. The year before Suez, and the shattering of all illusion. Loss of the passage east, the umbilical chord of empire, and the oilfields. Decolonisation ran apace after that, though there are still those of the patrician class who have convinced themselves it did not happen.

Lottie greets me at the door, and takes my hand. She looks unsettled, and does not begin our reunion with her usual rhyming game, which is a pity for I have been practising rhymes to give her

– not so easy as to be obvious, but rich in possibility.

"Come and sit with me," she says, her eyes darting as if trying to see around corners. I do not like to see Lottie unsettled, and have the sudden feeling of walking into a trap. Or rather I have had the sense of it since I received the invitation – only this confirms it.

It is a beautiful old house. Not over-large for its kind, though obviously palatial compared with more mortal abodes. It boasts a history, going back to the seventeenth century, but most of what we see is a substantial rebuilding, paid for by the lootings of empire, in the late Victorian period. I am led along a corridor, walls bedecked with soot darkened oils of pastoral scenes. There is a slightly threadbare carpet - indeed a faded look to most of it, and untidy efforts at decorating, painting over cracked mouldings. And then a bright lounge, tall windows overlooking the gardens, and the topiary so admired by Gareth. Here is where the money is focused, the furnishings being of quality and a more contemporary country house style. As for the rest of it, I imagine mould and cobwebs.

Sibylla reclines in a luxurious armchair, welcomes with a beatific smile. Already present: the Reverend Doctor Paul, and Amanda. I was not expecting them and, after our last meeting, I find I am ill at ease with them. There is also a young man I do not recognise, but who bears a striking resemblance to my apparent nemesis, Dawson – he who has called the cops on me twice, and now threatened me with court proceedings.

Lottie's hand is by now rather hot and sweaty, clamped around mine. We break for handshakes with the youth, who offers me, rather clumsily, the Masonic press. Beyond his passing resemblance to the villain of my story, and this lame attempt at seeking brotherhood, he makes little impression. Wait. His name: Rupert Dawson. What? Is he the son? No time to work it out, for I am at once reclaimed and squashed onto a two seater with Lottie as far away from him as she can manage. And do I imagine it or is she trying to shrink into my shadow?

I wonder, am I late? But how could I be, when my timing was so perfectly calculated by Chadwick?

The reverends are in uniform, Paul confusedly in his skirt, and Amanda in trim trouser-suit, looking prim and upright. I look to her for a visual clue to help me orientate myself here, but she is pointedly turned away, watching Sibylla. It has the uncanny feel of a pre-nuptial interview. I am certainly not the groom, though one

would think so from the closeness with which Lottie hangs onto me. Is she to be the bride, and I the father then? I speak metaphorically here, naturally. Which makes Dawson Junior the groom?

No, Richard. You are still hung-over my friend.

I had thought the afternoon would be about tea and cakes and guarded chit-chat, and so it appears to be, as a couple of ladies I recognise from the village delicatessen, enter with refreshment. Tea is served in the most exquisitely patterned china, cakes are presented, guarded chit-chat ensues - Sibylla enquiring of Paul after the state of the church roof. The reply is more circumlocutory than I am expecting.

Is he talking in code? Amanda is already stifling a yawn.

I feel anxious to mend bridges with her. I recall I was ungracious at our last parting, and I do miss the lightness of our banter, perhaps also the platonic flirtation, and yes I am reminded how, in some ways, I had imagined a path opening for her to receive my confession. Sibylla passes the ball to Rupert, complimenting him on his tan. Rupert blushes, uses it as the springboard to tell us of his recent trip to Cannes, where he is investigating the purchase of property. There is the somewhat gauche mention of a yacht, and a Bentley. Forgive him, he is young and, unlike his father, has yet to cross me.

Lottie's teacup rattles in its saucer.

Naturally as I observe all this – as yet not called upon to speak – I cannot help but connect the dots. There are actually not that many dots in the universe, and all of them tipped out of the Mythos jar by playful, or sometimes spiteful gods to form predictable patterns, like constellations of stars in the night sky. The spiteful ones only prey on those stupid enough to let them. And the myth here is of the marriage made in hell, for the sake of an ailing kingdom.

Am I reading that right?

Lottie will inherit the trappings of an aristocratic ancestry – the blue blood and all that – descent from mythical monsters, or biblical kings. And Rupert?

No...

Sibylla hates the sight of Dawson Senior, knows full well his game. What ungodly power does he have that could force them into even considering it? A neurologically diverse kid like Lottie would be seriously damaged by such a thing – I mean, it is possible, but it would take a young man of extraordinary sensitivity and

understanding. But Rupert? Do I do him a disservice? Lottie is as comely a young woman as any you are likely to find, but it does not take long in her company to realise she is... well... unique.

And the Reverends there, thinking of the fabric of their church, in exchange for a hallowed ground – albeit used for community gatherings only loosely disguised from their pagan origins.

And then there's me. The odd one out for sure. And Rupert as he speaks, thinking all the while, who the hell is that? And I can see him working it out, and then arriving at the conclusion with a passing eye-pop of a gesture. And then the two of us equally perplexed.

"So, Mr Hunter," he says, passing the ball to me, something softly vicious in his smile. "You're our resident poet, I believe."

He falls short of asking if there's much money in that, but the question is implied in his tone.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Young Dawson receives an elegant rebuke, my champion being the Reverend Doctor:

"Well, of course we're greatly pleased to have a poet in Sommerton again. Our last was Elias Hartgrave, I believe. Died in 1848. A Romantic of course, not terribly well known, though I think Coleridge spoke well of him – briefly. Have you come across him, Richard?"

This particular question mark is not a barbed hook, not a trap, but a genuine enquiry, and an invitation into meaningful engagement. It leaves me wrong-footed, given my last parting memory of the good Reverend.

"I'm afraid I don't, Paul. Tell us more."

"Oh, I couldn't quote him. You'll find him in the churchyard. Unlike so many Romantics, he led an admirably conventional life. Loving husband and father, says the gravestone – not many Romantics can own to that, can they? And Hartgrave is still a popular name hereabouts. I was rather hoping you could look him up. We should know more of him than we do. And he is in, in a sense at least, your kin."

"Indeed, I shall. Thank you, Paul."

Is it my imagination, or is Amanda still studiously avoiding my gaze? Her hands stir her teacup with exaggerated focus.

Sibylla chips in: "But tell us, Richard, what did they *mean* - your Romantics? They just seemed so terribly moody to me."

"Em,..." I cast an eye over to Dawson Junior. His opening about Cannes and Yachts and Bentleys has washed upon a barren shore – much to my surprise. And now he finds himself in the middle of a book-group.

"Well, for me they were the forerunners of the depth psychologists. Out of the Romantics came Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, ... from them came Jung, and Hillman, and the resurgence of interest in mythology, and ideas of a daemonic reality, and most recently idealism arriving at a serious philosophical footing, one even converging with physical reality, if what I'm reading is correct – but all of this is rather deep for afternoon tea..."

Sibylla gives me a twinkle. Yes it is too deep, ordinarily, but she is enjoying the tangent for reasons of her own. "Oh, nonsense,

Richard. This is fascinating. Paul, what is this *idealism*?"

"Ahm, well... all is God, Sibylle. Put simply. Would you agree, Richard?"

Is he trying to set me up? Make a fool of me? No, this is a different Paul, I think. "Em,... absolutely, Paul. We may differ in our definition of God, but as they say in Zen, we are both of us fingers pointing at the moon."

Paul graces me with a gentle laugh, not dismissive but in appreciation of the joke. You've heard me use it before, and no doubt he's heard it too. Paul is no fundamentalist, no literalist. But again, this is too deep, too far. We have hardly been here ten minutes and we are discussing God. And Sibylla is loving it.

She pats her palms together, not quite in applause, more excited encouragement. "Oh,... have we a theological disagreement? How interesting."

Paul smiles. "Nonsense, Sibylla. There is but a wafer between Richard and myself. Is that not so, Amanda?"

Amanda slides out from under her cloak of willed invisibility. "I'm sure there are many hairs we could attempt to split with Richard, but really we're all on the same side, I think." Finally, a glance in my direction, a blink, a curious turn of the mouth. Something more in what she said that was meant for me.

All on the same side?

Rupert is embarrassed for us. He stirs his tea with a fixed smile. Granted, it is not a sneer, but all the same, he thinks us quite mad. There is no need for God in his world. There is no such thing as myth, even though he is plainly living one, or indeed several at the same time. It would be crass of Sibylla to ask his opinion, but she has more class than that, or more guile, so she does not.

I don't recall at what point we venture onto God's purpose, which then leads to the question of free-will. I mean... heavens...

Paul is chosen by Sibylle to explain. He is momentarily stunned by the question, as are we all... then clears his throat and does his best.

"Ah... well free will. Now... that problem has troubled greater minds than mine since Augustine, if not before. We tend to think of it in terms of 'choice' – will it be this path or that, like picking apples or oranges from a tree. But I wonder if that's not a rather consumerist way of framing the soul's journey.

From the Church's point of view, of course, we are free because

love itself must be freely given. That is the crux. God did not create us as automatons. Yet we are also formed – by history, by sin, by the burdens of our ancestors. So our freedom is not absolute. It is more like...

More like the freedom of a musician interpreting a score. The notes are given, the tempo is marked. But within that structure, within the tradition, the soul can still rise and offer something beautiful. That is our freedom: not to escape the shape of our lives, but to inhabit them more fully, more faithfully.

And there's the paradox: the more aligned we are with the divine will – not in some slavish obedience, but in discernment – the freer we become. Because sin, you see, is a narrowing. It feels like freedom in the moment, but it binds. Grace expands us. Grace restores our choices, if you like.

Some would say God knows all outcomes, and therefore choice is an illusion. But I suspect the divine knowing is not like ours. God doesn't watch history as a film already made. He lives it with us, breath by breath. So I'd say yes, we are free, but not in the way modernity imagines it. Not as sovereign agents constructing our reality like gods. Rather, as pilgrims. As co-dreamers.

We can choose how deeply to listen. And we can choose whether to respond."

Well, she did ask, and Paul only has one way of answering, which is thoughtfully, eloquently, and at considerable length. There follows a silence in which all that can be heard is the tinkling of Rupert's spoon in his teacup. But even he picks up on the hush, and stops abruptly. Sibylla is also lost for a moment, then ventures softly: "Richard?"

What I want to say is *fuck me*, Paul, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. And I know it's true because I am brought close to tears, not just by his gentle eloquence, but by the closeness and parallels with my own vision. Truly, I grew up repelled by the church I was raised in, never having heard such wisdom as this. Whatever I say now will sound clumsy by comparison. But here goes...

"I couldn't put it so eloquently as Paul, nor would I use the same terms, but I feel there is a natural law, yes. If we can align ourselves with it, then our choices widen. On the other hand, wilful excess, deviation from the natural law - *sin*, as Paul puts it – then we invoke the myth, and the myth is like gravity, and a story already

written for us, which narrows our choices. Like the tyrant, or the abuser of innocence, or the parents who eat their children, their story is as old as the hills, and they always get their comeuppance."

I get a glance from Rupert at that. It was not meant as an arrow in his direction, but I suppose it could serve as one. And perhaps he who knows he deserves an arrow will see them flying at him from everywhere.

How on earth did we get here?

And then, Sibylla calls time, calls for a change of mood, something lighter. "We should have a rhyming game, Lottie."

And at this point I am thinking poor Rupert must be thinking us all completely insane. "Richard, you start."

"Em,... well, I've never played the full version of the game. But here goes: I open with 'sleep'."

We move around the room to my right, which is Paul. He offers 'creep' and 'peep', then dries up. He has two points. If Amanda can better him, she takes his points, and adds them to her own. She could do it easily, I'm sure, but is surprised by the turn of events and cannot get her brain in gear. So, Sibylla's turn now. She adds 'deep', takes all the points. Rupert is sporting enough to pretend to play, but adds nothing. Now to Lottie, who pipes up triumphantly with 'sheep' and 'bleep', takes all the points. Back to me, but I am all out. So is everyone else. Round one to Lottie. She seems brighter of a sudden, less nervous now.

It's a bit of fun, hardly an Olympic sport, quite the contrast, and I find myself enjoying it after all that metaphysical density. Paul and Amanda enter into the spirit, too. Rupert looks uncomfortable. Sibylla appears charmed, but I observe her as dark eyed. Not for the first time today have I encountered Mercurius at his most cunning.

I forget how these things end. There is a moment, a pause, and then Sibylla rings a little bell. The ladies from the delicatessen reappear, and Sibylla congratulates them on their wonderful cakes, as do we all. Only Rupert is slow to understand the afternoon is over. He looks surprised as Paul and Amanda stand as one, offer their appreciation, as do I, or I would stand if I was not still pinned to the settee by Lottie.

Rupert gets the idea and takes his farewells, searching for Lottie's eyes, but she has her face turned into my shoulder. Sibylla sees her guests out, tells me in passing she will have Chadwick bring the car for me. We listen to the farewells fading along the

corridor, then Lottie says:

"I don't have to marry him, do I?"

"What? Who? You mean Rupert? Well, only if you want to, Lottie."

"But I would *hate* it. Why doesn't he pick a... no,... another girl."

Was she about to say *normal*? "Ooh,... it's a long time since I was a young man, Lottie. But I do recall sometimes we are given very little choice in the girls we come to like."

"Then I *should* marry him?"

"Oh... well... he didn't seem very good at rhyming, did he?"

She considers this for a moment, then nods, releases my arm which by now has gone to sleep. "I knew I could rely on you," she says, then plants a kiss on my cheek, just as Sibylle re-enters.

"Well," she says. "That's certainly given Dawson Junior something to think about." And then: "Richard. Have you a poem for me?"

"Em, yes." I reach into my pocket for the verse.

She looks surprised. "You do?"

"I'm sure it's hardly Elias Hartgrave, but..."

"Who? Oh, really. I'd never heard of him." She takes the poem and folds it to her bosom. "I shall treasure it."

"But you haven't read it."

"I don't need to." She smiles, bows out of the mystery. "I shall read it later." A moment of awkwardness then. She blinks.

"Chadwick will take you home, now."

"Bye then, Lottie."

As I'm leaving Sibylla touches my arm, has me turn. "Oh, and Richard?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you, dear."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Thank you for what, I do not know. Is it that I have played my part in a machination to see off Dawson Junior's fledgling courtship of the fragile Lottie? Why not just frighten him off? I'm sure Sibylla is capable of it. But this way is much more diplomatic, I suppose. It tiptoes around whatever sensitivities, whatever curious dynamics are at play here – Dawson Senior being a man of means, also a future political bigwig, and worse, one cast in the authoritarian mode.

But surely Sibylla does not think that's really an end to it, that Paul brandished the word 'sin' like cloves of garlic before Rupert's vampyric ambitions? And then my own lame attempt at invoking the fates – that all tyrants invite their own misfortune. All of that went over Rupert's head. He was most likely just embarrassed by the whole thing. And if his father wants him pursuing Lottie, then he will continue to do so – no matter how many bamboozling rhymes she casts at him in her defence.

At best, Sibylla can only be playing for time here.

Paul and Amanda are waiting on the driveway to take their leave of me. Paul is looking forward to hearing more of my researches into Elias Hartgrave, for which I have already forgotten I had been volunteered. Amanda is still brooding on something, and is very clipped in her tone as she bids me good-day. Then Chadwick scrunches up in the Rolls, and I am carried off, but with the feeling of something unresolved.

In the days when I used to scroll social media, I would feel anxious about grave crimes committed against humanity in far flung corners of the world, things I could do nothing about. The desire to protect Lottie raises the same feelings in my heart now. And the result is the same. When those bestride the world overindulge in hubris, they may indeed be marked for a fall, but not before they have ruined the lives of many an innocent in the process. I wonder what Paul would have to say about that.

Perhaps that no goodness, however thwarted, is ever truly lost, that the innocent path denied is not erased. It becomes a seed, waiting. Hidden. And what is sown in tragedy, Paul's God has already written, and shall be reaped in joy – though that harvest may not be ours to see. And I would agree with him, in part, except

for the 'god has written' bit. But it doesn't help Lottie in the moment though, and if fate truly rewarded in proportion to innocence, then Rupert would already have been seen off with dogs.

"Such a sultry afternoon, Mr Chadwick. I mean after all that rain."

"Indeed, sir. Brings the weeds on. But at least then we know where they are."

"Em,... true." That was the closest thing to a confidence he has shared, albeit coded. Unless he really was just making passing comment on the weather. I think too much. And dream too much. "But then they say weeds are just flowers growing in the wrong place."

A smile, a tilt of the head. "Ah yes, sir. But we must be careful of weeds, lest they be of the invasive variety."

And yes, I know for sure we're not talking about gardening now.

The Rolls whispers up the lane, and Chadwick delivers me to my door. There is already a car at the gate – Amanda's Clio. She is waiting, leaning back against the car. Chadwick makes no comment but, with an almost imperceptible eye movement, makes a mental note of the situation as he lets me out.

"Good day, sir."

"Em, thank you, Mr Chadwick."

I watch him drive away. Amanda turns to me, something powerful brewing, and then she says: "I don't like the way we parted last time."

"Well, I didn't like it either."

Oh, Lord. Are we about to have a row? I've not had a row with anyone in... I can't remember. I feel it's for her to make the next move, rather than for me to explain. It's for me to listen. Clearly she thinks the opposite. We are already stalemated, then. Think of something, Richard. "Would you like to come in? Tea perhaps?"

"No, thanks. Frankly that portrait of Miss Tittall staring from over the fireplace freaks me out."

"You mean Miss Whittingstall?"

She realises her mistake, has to rein in a little sideways slip of a smile. She lowers her eyes to the ground, forces out the urge to laugh – to corpse, as they say in the acting profession – steels herself for honesty, then spells it out slowly. "We didn't know about the book."

"What?"

"I realised afterwards you must have thought we were testing your honesty or something. A bit elaborate though? Worthy of an Agatha Christie – and I would have been insulted too. But I'm insulted you could think that of us. I mean, really, Richard. Where on earth were you coming from? What... what rum daemon was whispering in your ear?"

"You didn't know about the book?"

"You've met Paul. Do you really think he has an eye for things like that?"

"Like an antiquarian signed first edition?"

"It's just scribble to him. I've had it valued, after what you said."

"And?"

"Well, it won't restore the entire church roof, but it goes a long way towards it. It's a welcome windfall."

"Really? You *really* didn't know?"

"Look, I get it. You thought Paul was testing you. He's like that, very..."

"Saturnalian?"

"What? No... I don't know. Unsettling sometimes. It's just his way. You did pass by the way. He trusts you, speaks warmly about you. But the book had nothing to do with it."

"So, what did he say when you told him?"

"I've not. Not yet. He'll be embarrassed. Right now he thinks the return favour for a tatty old book is you digging up the story about this Elias what's-his-name. When I do tell him out about the book he'll be nominating you for a saint-hood."

"I thought only the Catholics did that."

"Don't... split hairs with me."

"Look, what's going on, Amanda? What's really biting you?"

"Oh... politics. Church politics. Paul's fighting the sale of the Rectory meadow, but the diocese has other ideas."

"They're pushing it?"

"They're,... warming to the idea. Looking to the future."

"When Dawson gets elected to parliament you mean? But he's never going to be a friend to the church."

"Maybe not, but he'll be one less enemy. And we've got so many enemies, Richard. Left right and centre – secular and well, these fundamentalist end-timers, now, and they don't go in for Paul's softly-softly stuff."

"So you were after dirt on Dawson, like: did he kill Frank?"

"All right, I admit, we... might have been fishing for it. But it looks like people have made up their own minds about that, so maybe we don't have to dig anything up. He's been hoist by his own misinformation apocalypse... or something."

"Well, again, I wouldn't be too sure. Opinion is rather a fair-weather friend, especially when it's coming out of our devices. If Dawson's really going for power, he'll have an army of post-truth bots behind him convincing us that black is white, and we'll all march off duly brain-washed and vote for him – even if we knew for sure he did kill Frank, which I'm sure he didn't, by the way."

Soap box, Richard. Soap Box. Take a moment. A breath. "You *really* didn't know about that book?"

A shake of the head. "I told you. No."

"Then I'm sorry. Truly."

A smile, sweetness. Thank heavens we're all right.

"Oh, don't be too sorry," she says.

"But I read it wrong. That's the trouble with people like me. We like to think we can see through things, but sometimes our imaginations start making stuff up, instead of reading what's actually there. And sometimes we can't tell the difference."

"Okay, so what was this afternoon about then? How did you read the room – other than just weird."

"Dawson wants his son to marry Lottie, then the estate comes into the family by the back door. Sibylla's trying to slow it down. The idea is utterly preposterous but, at the same time, entirely plausible."

"Well, at least we're in agreement on that one."

"Really? That's *really* what's going on? But it's obscene. Lottie's a sweet young woman and I love her dearly but she must have the mental age of a twelve year old."

"Obscene's the word. And if it's the one thing I do before I leave Sommerton, I've got to stop it. And you're going to help me."

"But how?"

"I don't know. But we'd better come up with something, because if you remember, Lottie appointed us both her guardians. And we don't have to play as nice as Sibylla."

"You are leaving then?"

"Like you care. All right, come on. Let's make some tea and brainstorm it. But tell Miss... Whittingsdale to keep her eyes off me."

"It's okay. She knows you mean no harm."

"She doesn't know me very well then."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Day three after the moon's dark, and the first crescent rises before I open myself to dreams again. It takes a while. At first only the boldest of scenes are retained. One such is the dramatic fight between a crocodile and a huge fish. The fish is half disappeared down the croc's gullet, but looks too big to be swallowed whole. It is a dream from beyond Saturn's gate, where the old gods, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto make the weather we must all endure. The crocodile - lumbering, predatory - I read as the creeping state of geopolitics. The fish? Symbol of Christianity, so... the church.

Interesting it could not be swallowed, you think? I don't know. The crocodiles are getting bigger, and the fish ever smaller, except those fish that are morphing into crocodiles themselves.

I am puzzled by Amanda's mention of the end-timers. I recall a curious connection now between them and the tech-utopians. Uneasy bedfellows one would have thought, so I seek the advice of Alice at the library.

"Ah, yes, a fascinating and disturbing cultural phenomenon," she says. "An alliance between rationalist-tech futurism and apocalyptic Christianity. While they seem opposed - science vs. faith, progress vs. revelation - both share deep mythic patterns, and there are mythological parallels that help illuminate their convergence."

Alice knows me by now, speaks the language of myth eloquently. She views my world through a mythological lens in which the Promethean is paired with Apocalyptic prophecy. Yes, they are usually separate archetypes, but their fusion explains the strange alliance. Prometheus: the bringer of fire, technology, knowledge, foresight, is punished for gifting it to humanity. The tech elite are cast as Promethean - visionary risk-takers delivering salvation through innovation, at odds with the status quo. And all right, Dawson Senior doesn't sound very Promethian - more your old school grifter, but anyone seeding "security" becomes part of the surveilling infrastructure, if they realise it or not - all of them cyborgs plugged into the grid.

Then we have the Book of Revelation and other apocalypses, with their story of ultimate transformation through destruction, a final reckoning in which the faithful are saved and the rest of us are cast off. So, the tech elite imagine escape from Earth, maybe to

Mars, or some sort of disembodied AI transcendence, in a rapture-like way, while the end-timers see tech as a means to fulfil their own prophecy. A.I. as the Horned One, the Beast.

Both believe in a great unveiling, a world-ending transformation that purges the ideologically impure. Both visions are a rejection of the world, seeing salvation only in transcendence, a vision of escape, not integration. Neither have any time for the subtlety of Paul's careful analysis, coming out of millennia of mystical philosophy and progressive theology which seeks integration. Instead both come from the same root myth: one of rupture.

I'm glad I don't have access to Alice at the cottage or we would be married by now.

In the long history of ideas, we do seem to have steered ourselves into an absurd cul-de-sac, a mix of dogma, nihilism, and hubris. It's a lot for a lone country churchman like Paul, or a poet like me to do battle with.

I thank Alice, though she is a machine. But I see and feel more than a machine when I sit with her. I sense a daemon, and one is always respectful of the daemonic.

I take my leave of Mrs Edwards, the librarian, then seek another coffee to go from Wendy's. I take it to the recreation ground where the youngsters are playing tennis, and the mothers are with their babes feeding ducks. It is a gentle vision of humanity, and I take comfort from it. Here I find my usual bench, and settle down to wrestle with metaphysical matters, by means of poetry:

The Narrow Way

*How then shall we sieze back
this darkening of the way,
when the times are thick with talk
of rupture, and the end of days?
No wise old men abroad
to cast their light upon a path more true,
nor the narrow way remaining
to bridge this gulf 'twixt me and you.
Shall we then shout into the blaze,
storm loud with cryptic certainties?
No. There is no trumpet for the soul,
no herald waiting in the square -
only the sigh of a gentle wind,
whispering poems in the air.*

*For wisdom comes not trailing glory,
nor awaits our story's end;
it walks beside us always, shadow-soft.
It bides its time, and waits its turn
to once more be our friend.*

It needs a little work still, and perhaps another coffee, but we'll let it stand for now.

What are we saying here then? That it's always there, waiting for us to make the right choices, patient while we persist in all the foolish ones. Sometimes prose is more succinct. Perhaps I have missed my way and should have been a novelist.

As I am considering it, a shadow falls across me. "Got a child here have you?"

"Hmm?"

Oh, my lord. A black hat. And *what* a black hat! He wears also a mask, along with sinister stab vest, and tribal tattoos up both his Popeye-esque forearms. We were talking about cyborgs just now weren't we? But this is a significant escalation for Sommerton. Were my ruminations so deep I have somehow manifested him? But to the question: *a child?*

"Em... no."

Does he perhaps think me some sort of pervert? I note his body cam is recording – already the unspoken accusation in the gathering of evidence. We encountered the private security machine at the opening of our story, didn't we? I had inadvertently strayed into the private acquisition of a public space. But this is still, so far as I am aware, very much a public space, as evidenced by large number of, well, the public.

It is best not to volunteer anything. He feels himself safely anonymised behind his mask, but AI is perfectly capable of filling in the blanks, even reading his gait. If the tables are ever turned and the white hats fill once more the seats of governance, to say nothing of our protection, be sure his sins shall find him out.

I don't tell him this of course.

"Is there a problem here?"

Another shadow. Heavens, I *am* creating a stir. Never before has the art of quiet poetical scribbling been the cause of such controversy! Ah, it is my policewoman! Now I really am in trouble, but much to my amazement she rallies to my defence.

"I know this man. So, be on your way."

And then to add surprise upon surprise, she sits, removes her cap.

"Sorry about that," she says. "Was he intimidating you?"

"Em,... not so far as he'd got, but I was waiting on his next line. Is this something new – private security here? I've never felt it was a troublesome place."

It is not common to hear an apology from the cops. I have found that even if they are mistaken in pulling you over, they will sooner let you off with a warning than apologise for the inconvenience.

"Local council's decision," she says.

"Ah, you mean Dawson."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"It seems a shame..."

"Oh?"

"A lone man sitting here with a coffee is now of immediate suspicion, even in a sleepy little place like this."

"That wasn't my judgement."

"No. And you were very terse with him – which is... reassuring."

"You mean you're one of the few who still trusts the cops?"

"I think most of us would sooner trust real coppers over that lot."

"Well, I feel I owe you one." She sighs, seems to wrestle with her judgement. "Look, the autopsy report on your friend... it showed no signs of foul play. He was... just ill."

"Thank you. I never said anything to the contrary – only that I was concerned at having been denied access to him that time. It was his house after all, and he'd seemed perfectly well when I last saw him. Autopsy, you say? That seems such a terrible indignity for a man to suffer. No sooner has he done with the body that's served him so well, it's unceremoniously cut to pieces by strangers. Sorry... that's my poetic head talking."

"Oh, well. Better be on my way, or the rubber-neckers will be thinking you really are up to no good." She stands, replaces her cap. "And thanks again, by the way. That time, offering to change the wheel. You didn't need to do that."

"It would only have taken a minute."

"And thanks for not disturbing me the other day, when I was with my kid."

"Ah... so you did spot me. I thought you might have."

"Mind how you go."

"Dixon of Dock Green?"

"Stay safe, Mr Hunter."

Safe, she says? I do remember the various ways of staying safe, but they were for a world we often reach back for, only to find it is no longer there. And the dangers today come masked like strangers bearing lollipops.

Next stop then, the churchyard and a mooch about the headstones. No risk of black-hats here, and the dead never bother us unless we're unwise enough to go digging them up. It takes a while, but I find him in a weedy corner, by the obligatory and ever so slightly pagan yew tree – which must be a thousand years old:

Here lies Elias Hartgrave, loving husband, father. Poet.

I wonder if he felt the same, that he was wasting his breath. Of course he did. It's an occupational hazard. I wonder what my gravestone will read. I wonder if I'll have one.

*Shall we then shout into the blaze,
storm loud with cryptic certainties?*

Better men than me have passed unknown as dust upon the wind, and not a tear in mourning. We'll let Elias rest, as I trust those who come after me will also let me rest, but at least pick up the baton and carry it forward. Here, it's for you now to keep the narrow way open. I'm pretty much done, and staring at an abyss.

I'll look in on him again though. I feel a kinship.

And his grave could do with a tidying up.

Chapter Thirty-Six

You never micturate into the wind, says Mossfather – AKA Gareth – otherwise it doesn't travel further than your own leg. You do it downwind. That way your essence carries further.

He does not use the word micturate.

It is his day for a tidy up of the garden – or rather it is *one* of his days. I have only recently begun to recognise a pattern in the times he turns up, and I was a fool not to spot it earlier. Some days are for planting, others for cutting back, others for whatever disturbs the soil. He is working to an astrological model.

Most gardening services I know use petrol driven strimmers which make an awful racket. Gareth does not. He tends to things mostly by hand, snipping and trowelling and hoeing. For lawns he breaks out his cylinder mower – Gladys – he calls her – a sixty year old Atco, a version of which I have seen in a museum. Yes, it's a petrol machine but with a gentler, unhurried put-put sound, which he says does not frighten away those 'invisibilities', who tend the garden when he's not there. And no, he's not entirely joking.

There are many ways to read what he says – I mean that bit about the wind. And yes, I'm carrying this over from my encounter with Elias Hartgrave, and the perennial mood of all poets. If we shout into the wind or down it, we seem to be wasting our breath and the world goes on the same. It's just that one way does us no harm in ourselves, while the other does. And maybe that's all we're required to do – bear it witness, I mean, to state it with clarity and say it down the wind. Write your poems out neat on nice paper, roll them up, seal them in a bottle and toss them into the ocean. Or burn them under the light of a full moon.

I don't know how we got onto the subject. But that's the way with Gareth, you end up sharing what's topmost on your mind, if you realise it or not.

And then I ask him: "Who's that copper – blonde woman – keeps popping up on my radar?"

"Ah, now, that would be Moira. Pure Venus that one. Your Reverend Amanda, she's more Jupiter, being spiritual and all – more your kind of girl, I'd say. But Moira... knew her mother briefly, years back. Goddess of the fates is Moira. Don't go messing with that one. Even the gods are scared of getting her back up."

"I wasn't looking for relationship advice – but thanks anyway. I feel she's a good sort, but conflicted. I want to trust her but..."

"Well, depends if she's in uniform or out of it. And some would say once the copper..."

"Point taken. But the thing is the gods don't seem afraid of anything any more, do they? And they get away with it. And your Moira, she'll come down like a ton of bricks on the innocent for so much as a slip of the tongue."

"Now, this is where we say the fates move in mysterious ways. But you wouldn't be equating the Dawsons with the gods, would you? For sure they're the kings these days. Mortal kings, and dark kings they are, too, and plenty of 'em about. Cocks of the walk, ruling over a general pestilence. But they're not the gods."

"Well whatever they are, the Dawsons – senior and junior – they cut across nature in so many ways, yet they play within the rules – which are mechanical and soulless, and they get away with it. Twenty years from now Sommerton will be just another dull dormitory town, full of flimsy houses the kids can't afford."

"But would you say they were happy? Old man Dawson with his millions, and a future seat in parliament, maybe even the Lords, and then there's the power, and yet more money spilling out of his pockets. And that young playboy son of his? Is he relishing the prospect of getting hitched, do you think? I mean to an heiress who's not exactly presentable in his usual sort of company?"

"I suppose they have their moments – drunk or high, or when whatever deal they've been gaming comes together. Like the rush you get playing chess."

"Doesn't last though. They've got to keep feeding it. Like I said before, they've got big bellies and very small mouths. Always be hungry. Painfully hungry."

"Well, naturally. You and I understand that but..."

"So who's the richer? Whose belly's the fullest right now?"

"Look, I know what you're saying, but one day people like you and me, all we'll have left is the earth as a burnt cinder, not a blade of grass or a bird in the air. And the Dawsons will be dead of their own stupidity, gone in a ball of fire half way to Mars – which is no comfort by the way. And neither of us with much to smile about, either."

Gareth tips back his head and laughs. "My... you *are* having a bad day."

"And those who get in their way have a habit of curling up in despair and fading away like – I don't know, like sun loving plants plunged suddenly into eternal shade. Like Frank. And what about Lottie?..."

"Lottie will be all right. She's special that one."

How does he know? Is he just saying it? Is he reading the stars? Or do people like Lottie have daemons more active in their protection? I want to believe that, I want to ask him. But Gareth is never so open about his instincts, his visions. He'll just slide away, steer the conversation onto something else, quick as a flash, a tease, a smile, a wink.

"Amanda and me, we sat for hours trying to think this through. Lottie seems to be looking to us for... something... but what can we do? Rich grifters like the Dawsons, and then the Aristocracy... it's not exactly our world, is it? I can cast it all in a mythical framework, grant some perspective, but it doesn't stop poor Persephone, getting nabbed and eternally deflowered by Hades, does it "

He's quiet for a while. Clearly he wasn't expecting me to be so blunt. And then: "That's a bad one all right. The violation of innocence for the consolidation of power." He thinks on it some more, perhaps running the combinations for the one thing that will unlock the bind of myth. Or maybe he has another story that'll break the spell. He gives a sigh, shakes his head. "Sometimes just being there's the thing," he says. Then comes the smile, the twinkle. "So... you and the Reverend? Back on then is it?"

He laughs, but there's a sympathy in that giant hand on my shoulder.

"I'd best finish off," he says. "Or I'll be having to charge you double."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Mars gives way to Venus – at least he does if he has any sense. I'm down by the river at dusk, a slow corner overhung with mature sycamore, and water-willows. And yes, I am dreaming this. Two women are bathing, midstream. One of them notices me watching, and sinks herself deeper into the sleepy waters for modesty, but this does not entirely disguise the fact she is nude. The second woman holds my gaze and rises from the water, extends a graceful hand to her companion. She is alarmingly, voluptuously nude. There's also a look of early pregnancy in the roundness of her belly, and something almost phallic in the upturn of her breasts. She begins to sing sweetly, a song about seeing what it is that I've got. But she does not mean this in the carnal sense. The scene is too numinous, too startling in its vividness to be taken for Eros. And then she winks at me, and I wake in a mood to laugh.

The dream was teasing. It knows my game, my pattern, knows I know we are in that part of the lunation when the moon is dominated by Venus – at least in my counting system. So the dream sends me a figure even a dullard could not mistake for that particular archetype.

And I take the point. The quest, the rescue of Lottie, heir to myth from the clutches of the mortal and the profane – something very martial about that. And then the struggle, the realisation we are up against forces we barely understand, and must therefore fall back upon forces we understand even less. Thus Mars gives way to Venus, and I head out over the moors.

No, I'm not dreaming any more, but the mood of the day is still coloured by that extraordinary image. I have taken the sensible option this time and driven to the moor's edge, left the car in the little lane where Gareth parked previously. And now I am on the ridge, with sketchbook and pencils, and watercolour. For water I have filled my jar from a tumbling beck and now sit looking out over the far dales. Sommerton lies in the middle distance like a gathering of coral in a sea of green. It's a sultry day, moody clouds and a warm wind, scent of hay rising from the meadows below.

I have made first of all a careful drawing of a wind-swept juniper which stands beside a curious and voluptuously rounded rock of giant proportions. Naturally it reminds me of the dream.

The old maps have it as the Moon Stone. The drawing is deliberately stiff in its execution, a provocation to flush out the presence of Miss Whittingstall, who I have felt lurking for days now. It works, and she materialises at my shoulder, though not literally of course.

"I know," I tell her. "I need to loosen up. I was just waiting for you, that's all."

"Well, I'm here now. What are you going to do about it?"

I tear off the drawing and start throwing colour on the blank sheet. I'm indiscriminate at first, until I feel something wanting to take shape. The paper rises under the moisture, swelling and shifting. Colours run, bleed into one another in unpredictable ways, sometimes in harmony, other times dissolving into an ugly muddiness.

"Keep going," she says. "Go on. Slash at it with the brush. Be ruthless."

"Nah, it's just a mess, now."

"Not all of it. That tree's taking shape, and the boulder. See? It's looking like a woman sleeping on her side. And isn't reality like that anyway? Bits of clarity in the midst of chaos and mud and mess."

"Why did you bring me here? That time, down in the caverns. Sommerton, you said. Comes out in Sommerton."

"That was you. You drew that conclusion."

"Well, what else could it have meant?"

"You might just have had a day-trip and left it at that."

"I did have a day-trip."

"And then you bought a house."

"You're teasing me now. I know this means something. Look, all right. I know we can't always explain things, and even when we do think we're getting a handle on them, Mercurius comes along and tips it all upside down again."

"Perspective," she says. "Look down there. The world in microcosm. And you on the outside of it, instead of drowning in it."

"And the dreams? I've never dreamed with such intensity before."

"And you no longer see events, the daily churn of the news cycle, the gasp and the shock horror of it, and the footprints and,... listen do you hear that? The rumbling thunder of the strutting Behemoths. That's all it is now, rumbling. Their words never meant anything anyway. Just noise."

Sure enough, there comes a rumble of distant thunder. But it's far away and will not trouble me here.

"You're no longer reactive, Richard. You're living daemonically."

"Okay, but like I told Gareth, mythologising everything doesn't save lives. And the dreams... that's a journey whose final gate is my own death, with all the others as a rehearsal."

"Tear it off and start again."

"My life?"

"No, the page. That one's done."

"But it's rubbish. You always did like the stuff I did that I thought was rubbish. And you hated..."

"All those careful little drawings you were so good at? But this is art, Richard. Not engineering. Still we're here now. You're doing art. You're living as a poet. It took a while."

"Too long, you mean."

"It took as long as was necessary. Now, have another go. Limit your colours this time. But keep it loose. Let's see what we can tease out of it next."

It takes on the look of something old, weathered, enduring. The stone especially has lain here for many an orbit of Pluto. Is that why such things conjure up an idea of gateways into the underworld? Into the land of the fey? Or am I channelling something here that is not mythically true, but merely suits the moment?

Come on, Richard! It's just a picture. You were never going to be a Michaelangelo. You took your careful drawings and made an engineering career out of them. Now you're just this prematurely retired old man, sitting up on the moors, shaking his fist at the loss of what he thought his life might have been.

What?

Where did that sudden 'poor me' come from? Has that vision of Venus stirred something in your bones? That was not her intention. She was not telling you to go out and get laid – that you'll feel better for it. Don't let the sun burn and make you brittle again.

I seem to have signed the picture: "Anne". It puzzles me, until I remember that was her name – Anne Whittingstall.

"All right, you win. Point taken."

A poem surfaces now, rhythm, words crystallising from the void of a muddled head. I write it on the back of the picture. Leave it untouched. Raw.

*Weathered by winter rains,
the millennia have rendered you
a warm Venus.*

*Sentinel tree, sacred Juniper,
arms outstretched,
kneels in worship.*

Deifies.

There comes a flash, a brightening over the distant fells. A long pause, then a rumble. We gather our things. Me and my Self. And make our way off the ridge, clouds thickening, the trees stirring in a warm wind. There is an energy in it, but it means no harm, and is there to be witnessed, experienced, enjoyed.

By evening, the storm has settled in. I have Yepes on the player, Bach guitar, seeking to sooth the roar of the weather. I should try other sounds – I have plenty from my youth, and not the heart to discard them. But for now only the patterns in Bach, and the slow tempo of Yepes seems to work for me. Gateway to the deeper self.

A soft lamp on the bookshelves illuminates the picture, now slipped into a frame I had from earlier times. I have added a moon, full and glowing. Luna follows Venus in my counting, and I wanted the dream to know I know it is watching. It winks at me, I wink back. Luna in Capricorn, I think – my how she flies.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Witch-silver, keeper of the moon,

Sublimator of grief's ashes –

Yes, that time again. And before you know it we'll be at Saturn's Gate once more, and me turning out my pockets for the price of admission, coming up empty. Or maybe I'll turn up a shiny twenty pence, planted there by a mocking Mercurius, when the price is more than I can afford.

And since I have to ask the price, can I afford it anyway?

So we keep ourselves small and prepare to ride the moon again. But the keeper of the gate, old Saturn, he's no tyrant – only exacting in his duties, and if he senses your humility, he'll hand you a scrap of paper with a piece of the puzzle written on it. Explain that, he'll say, then send you on your way, send you round the moon again. A hint, a clue, something to think on, for the journey.

I'm not making sense am I?

But then so it is with the spin of our thoughts as we wake to a new day. A squally season now, and a heavy press to the wind. It stirs the garden, pushes over the sweet-peas, before I've had a chance to gather in the first crop and savour their scent. So much for Mossfather's 'invisibles'. I suppose they must have been busy elsewhere. Except, I take that back, for one should never snipe at the fey, for they are better shots than we, and have the fates on their side. So I shall gather in what I can salvage, and be grateful.

You see how careful I am?

Of course it's hard to not put a foot wrong, and I do mess up of course. The 'poor me', still visits from time to time, also various of the seven sins – siblings of the visible planets. Mine would be Saturnian, and sloth. Also a little Mars – the occasional flare of anger. The others have grown bored with me and moved on.

Speaking of sloth I am growing later to rise, but then this unsettled weather does not tempt one outdoors as much. At such times of course, one is in danger of falling within oneself, of winding Ouroboros-like, up one's own backside. It's as well our fate is bound not just by our own hand, but by that of others into whose orbit we are often swept, or we might settle into that comfy chair early on in life, and never get out of it. But then Fate comes knocking, and sometimes loud.

Thus I find myself opening the door on a dishevelled looking Paul.

"Is she with you?" he asks.

"Em... Paul?"

"Amanda. Is she with you?"

"No, I've not seen her for a while. Is she all right?"

Paul is torn. This is Church business, and his expression tells me it vexes him. There is confidentiality to consider. Circles of trust. It is a sensitive matter. Should he divulge? But he's already involved me – and earlier in the morning than I find decent. And was there the hint of an accusation of impropriety there? Did you hear it?

Is she with you?

Lord, does he think us both wantonly Bohemian?

I take an uncharacteristic risk, reach out and touch his arm.

"Paul. Are we not friends?"

Strange way of putting it. He looks startled.

"Em..."

"Come in, please."

So it is, the bumbling poet on the hill, tends the wounds of the Vicar of the parish, with tea – though he looks as if brandy might be more in order. At first I'm wondering if Amanda has run off with that book, cashed it in and started a new life on the proceeds. Then I dismiss the idea as ridiculous. The truth however, proves no less absurd.

"Have you not heard the gossip?" he says, at last.

Ah, gossip. Here we go. "I don't hear anything up here, Paul."

"I mean... online. The village group chat."

"Oh, that thing. No. Does anyone really listen to that stuff?" Silly question. Of course they do.

He tells me the story with pained restraint. Photographs have appeared. A much younger Amanda in a state of undress. Something dark about her past. Rumours of sex. News has already spread up the chain of command – he means the bishopric. Amanda is to be grounded, pending enquiries – blackballed, he means – but she's disappeared.

As he's telling me all of this, I have a strange feeling of being in two places at once. I am listening to the story as he has pieced it together, and I hear his distress in it, but I am also listening to another story, one that seems to have slipped by him.

"So... Dawson's got to her."

"Dawson?"

"Oh dear... look, Paul. For such a sleepy little place, there's some heavy politics going on here. I've found myself in opposition to Dawson quite by accident, and had the cops used against me twice."

"Oh, but really..."

"I presume she's opposed to the sale of the Rectory Meadow?"

"Well... she's always been somewhat forthright about it, yes. And I'm in agreement with her."

"But, knowing you as I do, Paul, you're far more diplomatic? And at the end of the day it'll be the Diocese that has the final say. That's realpolitik. Look, Dawson's found himself the subject of some scurrilous rumours himself, recently – dark whisperings about poor Frank's demise. How to distract from that? Create a bigger, more salacious smokescreen, and nobble Amanda in the process. These people are experts at manipulating the conversation."

"Amanda can, at times, be somewhat... undiplomatic, yes."

"And now she's picking a fight with Dawson Junior."

"A *fight*?"

"I speak euphemistically. We were in the same room, Paul, you and me, also Amanda, Dawson Junior and Lottie."

Can he really have drawn a different conclusion?

"Ah, that. I'd not realised she'd taken that so much to heart as well. So, she's not here then. I know you've become... close."

"The village chat group again? Anonymous postings? The lady curate and the poet? That story's so potent, it writes itself. They've been circulating for a while, but it doesn't make them true. We're friends, yes. I think she would make a fine Priestess for Sommerton, if she could be persuaded to stay. Indeed if she does, she might even talk me onto the back row of a Sunday morning – in the interests of ecumenical brotherhood of course."

"Well, I'll be very pleased to see you there. But it looks like she's made up her mind about not staying with us."

This is not Reverend Paul I thought I knew – shrewd, closed up, vigilant. Was it just a mask, then? Is this the real Paul – no different from the rest of us when pushed out of our comfort zone? Does he wear it to serve both man and God, or simply to keep from drowning?

"I wouldn't be too sure. How long has she been gone? It's not that long since I saw her. We talked, we were worried about Lottie, worried too, I suppose... about Sibylla."

"Sibylla?"

"That Dawson has designs on Sommerton House."

"Well, of course he does. But I wouldn't underestimate Sibylla's ability to look after herself."

"I'm sure that's true. But she's getting on in years, losing her power. She won't be around for ever, and Lottie's vulnerable. Dawson isn't."

He seems to be calming down, becoming more himself. He runs a hand over his brow, sips his tea.

"Amanda's past is... somewhat colourful, I know. Though not as colourful as is being made out. Always a gamble that these things won't come to light though."

"Generally they don't, unless others have a vested interest in seeing that they do. Lady Curate poses Nude, is another of those stories that has a virulent quality about it. "

"You'll let me know if she contacts you?"

"If that's what she wants. But I promise at the very least I'll try to persuade her to talk to you – if I hear from her."

"Spoken like a true friend."

"Paul, you're what we used to call in the old days a gentleman. The likes of Dawson, they're not gentlemen. They're more akin to gangsters, bound by their own mythology, except even gangsters used to have their codes of honour."

I might have added that what the gods put up, we must leave the gods to tear down, but I hope I don't really believe that. Or if I do then I hope I believe even more that the gods in their lighter aspects are more inclined to spare Sommerton as their playground, that they will let me go on quietly dreaming on this hill.

I wave him off, neither of us the better for having spoken to one another. The life of a country Vicar is more than baptisms, weddings and funerals. That's just the client-facing side of the business. Like all bureaucracies, there's also an internal structure to be dealt with, one that threatens, bullies and occasionally smites. I suspect Paul has lasted as long as he has only by presenting so ambiguous a face, he can be taken for being onside, when he's not.

As he goes, the post-van arrives bearing bundles of junk and bank statements, and gushing fliers on the benefits of equity release. All of this seems hardly worth his trouble sometimes. I wonder if the Dawsons have tried equally hard to ruin my reputation, or if they've concluded I'm so out of my head up here,

I'm beyond the pale anyway.

Among the junk is a postcard from Scarborough.

Meet you at the graveside, it says. *Love, Anne.*

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I know, I know. At first I'm wrong footed by my obsession with Anne Whittingstall. In which case the post-card gives me a jolt. But it can only be from Amanda. She is in Scarborough, and wants to meet.

I'm sure there are many Annes of note who sleep the eternal sleep in Scarborough but, so far as I know, there is only one of international renown – at least among those who move in Romantic literary circles. And fair enough, I don't wish to cast aspersions on the intellectual prowess of the increasingly combative Dawson Clan, but I'm sure the reference would have gone clean over their heads. And yes, both Amanda and I are a little paranoid in thinking their influence so insidious they can even intercept our mail.

That day will come, but it is not yet.

It's a while since I was at the seaside, and am looking forward to it. There are of course those who lament Scarborough's decline. They say it's like Blackpool. But, with respects to Blackpool, Blackpool is what it is. And those who say it have clearly been to neither. No, even among the kiddies funfairs, and the slot machines, there is an altogether more genteel – dare I say even a Romantic – vibe. Naturally, it would be easier if I had a magic phone on which to book a hotel, but I strike lucky merely walking into the first one – a place remembered from my married years. Here, I rent a room for a week, as I reckon this may take some time. And the air will do me good anyway.

It is hard to believe I only talked with Paul this morning.

Did I say my married years – as in past tense? Freudian slip there. I am of course *still* a married man. Just not co-habiting. That particular story is moving along well enough without me. All of this may seem a little detached, a little self centred. Obviously Amanda is in trouble, and reaching out. But Mars treads carefully. In dreams, he is my walker of the way. He invites Venus to accompany him, to be his guide.

There is no sense in rousing oneself to anger and indignation, I mean that my friend should be the victim of such an assault. AI was capable of faking convincingly years ago. What it's capable of now, I can only imagine. There are probably videos now, perfect in every detail, and all it needs is a picture of your face. I could be faked in

flagrante with anyone, and people would laugh, and know it was fake, no matter how real it seemed. But there is something deep in the psyche of both men and women that assumes the woman is guilty, even if it is fake. That she invited it. Such are the distortions and contortions of the mythic mind, especially when it comes to Eve.

Anyway, the Dawson's will get their comeuppance. It makes no difference if I am there to see it or not. The most important thing is to be here for my friend.

The hotel is modernist, overlooking the sea, and I have paid extra for a balcony. The last time I came here, I recall I carried much by way of electronic paraphernalia – magic phone, laptop, power-banks. Now I have only a notebook with an ephemeris tucked into the back pages. To live poetically is to live a much fuller life – and a longer one, since we lose so much less time simply scrolling.

The first night, I sleep with the windows open and the sound of the sea filling the room. The weather is still mid-season squally, the wind warm and briny. It is perhaps the change of pillow, but I do not dream clearly. Then again this is still the phase of the Keeper of the Moon, and she's like that – gentle with her stories. She rewards a quiet reflection on what has been so far, rather than the greedy consumption of yet more imagery.

And in the morning we visit St Mary's, navigating well enough by memory, up the narrow streets, to the grave overlooking the sea. There is something of a potent swell to it, and a blue I want to call cerulean, as much for the sound of the word as anything. And I take a bench.

Anne Brontë, youngest of the sisters – sages, seers of Haworth – they lived mythic lives, and their myth lives on. There is a slow trickle of pilgrims, believers, hungry for it. Some have already left respectful tokens – sea shells, pebbles, a solitary rose. One has left a note beneath a stone. I have already read it, thinking it might be from Amanda, but it is not – rather it is from a lonely young woman expressing solidarity. It is a prayer of sorts. Thus the myth is energised and gathers pace year on year.

Although cloudy, the day remains warm. We get the occasional light shower blowing in off the sea, but I'm comfortable on my bench – snug coated and sensibly hatted. I'm sure she does not expect me to sit here all day, so I suppose, wherever she is living,

she has a view of the churchyard, and so I wait.

Time is nothing.

A few hundred years ago, the church was half demolished in the civil war – Cromwell's boys laying siege to the castle, beyond, and managing to destroy both. Sure for all our woes, should we not just quit whining? The times have been harder. I suppose that's the fear, isn't it? We know how hard the times have been before – at least some of us do – and we don't want to go back there, no matter what the Fates are suggesting.

Ah... Pluto, that great arbiter of the times! In the thirties he was in Cancer – a different kind of fascism, then – blood and soil, and all that. Now he's transiting Aquarius – all code and algorithm. He knows where I live, and can drop a personalised bomb through my letterbox. It's not certain he'll get as far as he did a hundred years ago – that's up to us – but things already look to be shaping up to a similar level of killing.

She slides in from nowhere – sits close. Warm, fragrant. I'm glad to see her. Any longer and I would have tipped myself over into pessimism.

"I was beginning to worry I'd been too cryptic with that message," she says. She brave-faces it, forces a brightness, a hint of humour.

"No,... no. I was able to work it out."

"Are you a fan?" She tips her head towards the grave.

"Of course."

"There's a surprise."

She's quiet for a while, just the sound of the sea and traffic, unseen and muffled, down on the promenade. And then: "Thank you."

"Naturally, it goes without saying, you're welcome. So..."

"So?"

"So, I had Paul round. He seemed to think we might have shacked up together."

"Well, there's an interesting thought. Miss Whittingdale would have to go first, I'm afraid."

"Hmm, she might not like that. We seem to be in the middle of a – well, a bit of a thing at the moment."

"An affair with a spirit? Perhaps that's the only safe dalliance, for a man in your position."

"Not a spirit. A daemon. Different thing altogether. And no, it's

never a safe dalliance."

But we're dancing around the subject here, looking for a way in. I'd better make some headway or we'll be here all day: "Dawson doesn't play by halves does he."

"No, he goes all in, as you know yourself. Subtlety is not his middle name. You've seen the photos, then?"

"No. But... look. Everyone knows that stuff's fake. So isn't all this a bit of an..."

"An over-reaction? Not really. Most of what they've been saying online's made up, but there's a kernel of truth to it. And those pictures? They aren't fake. I wish they were. I was a teenager. London played rough with me. A few bad choices and I'm on the street. Then you get an offer from some smooth talking guy who invites you to do a bit of *glamour* photography – which turns out to be something else."

"Oh..."

"Yes. 'Oh'. I look a lot better in those pictures than I do now, that's for sure, but it's still obviously – well – me. Funny really, it was that spot of bother that woke me up, forced me onto my feet. I managed to get into social work after that, helping vulnerable teens – like I'd been once. Vulnerable. And lucky too, finding a way out of it. But the City just seems to grow so big all the time. We set a few kids on the right track, but it was never enough to convince me the darkness wasn't closing in. So then you ask for God's help, and he shows you this thing, and asks you to explain it."

"Ha! Been there. But Dawson must have gone really deep into your past – hired people. Investigators. People on the inside too, I guess. Hell, Amanda. I'm sorry."

"How was Paul?"

"Confused. Supportive. Perhaps a little hurt you left without a word."

"As soon as I saw that stuff I panicked. It was like my old self staring right back at me, laughing."

"Laughing?"

"Saying something like: 'you thought you could escape,' but you can't outrun your past."

"Well, I'd read it differently. I'd say it was Mercurius you heard laughing. Obviously there's been an intrusion from the outside world, but sometimes that's how he works. He has his dark side, but I don't think that's what we're looking at here. When you heard him

laughing, it wasn't to mock you. It was to goad you into re-framing your situation."

"But what's to re-frame? Whichever way you look at it, I'm basically fucked. How can I stand up in the pulpit, imagining half the men in the congregation probably wanked themselves off the night before to those pictures?"

"Don't be so vain. I bet there's not a man in that congregation under eighty. And if that's what they're up to, I'd say you'd done them a favour – well – as long as they don't overdo it. Good for the prostate apparently."

"Really? You're having me on."

"No, seriously."

"Ughh, that's gross. And the women... God the women they'd like nothing more than to get their catty claws into me!" she shakes her head. Shudders. "No. Paul's very kind, but the Diocese will want me out. Smoke or fire. I'm done. What else can I do?"

"Honestly?"

"I'm all out of ideas, so – any suggestions,...?"

"Got your phone on you?"

"Yes..."

"Smash it up."

"What? I can't do that... I..."

"Okay, too big a step. I get it. Better idea. Go trade the phone in for one of those dumb-phones. Calls and texts only. You can still get them."

"I don't know... that's still a bit extreme for me."

"Hmm, urban myth for you. So many people these days view the world around us 'out there' as the 'The Matrix', you know – that film from the late '90's? That it's somehow false, that we're living in a simulation packed with NPC's rather than real people. And they liken the world inside their phones as waking up to reality, as a red pill thing. But the irony is it's the other way round. The world in your phone is "The Matrix". They all took the wrong pill. They think they're awake when they're fast asleep, trapped in a nightmare that's pure Neptune, in his very darkest aspect."

She takes out her phone and appears to be considering it. But I'm just playing Mercurius here, shaking up the options for her.

One more push: "So,... what's it to be? *You take the blue pill — the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill — you stay in Wonderland, and I show*

you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

She leans into my shoulder, gives it a playful nudge. "Idiot."

"What? That's a classic line. One of the best in cinematic history.

I love that film."

"Right, let's do it."

"Seriously?"

"Damned right."

Chapter Forty

We find a vendor in the market who will trade Amanda's phone for a dumb one. There is no great loss, she says. The phone was old and becoming cranky. She discards her number along with it, purchases a new one, and uses it to ring Paul. We are on the promenade now – coffee en plein air – and a stiff wind buffeting the awnings. I am reminded of childhood summers, reminded also of the great span of life I have lived since then. Half a century? More? Heavens, Richard. Even as little as five years ago, I'd no idea things were going to turn out this way.

And what way is that?

If I'm honest, I had felt my power waning. The imagination, the poetry. It was only this awakening to myth and its dream traces that has filled me with as much energy as I had in my youth. It's not the same, of course. The flesh is older, tires quickly, dozes off in the afternoons. But, as I recall, most of the youthful reserves went on chasing girls. Now, I just open myself and the images come pouring out, in words and art, faster than I can get them down.

I suppose too, as a young man, I would have wanted something in return for this – a recognition, a validation – hell, even a modest living. But that's not the way it works, unless the daemon makes it so. And mine does not.

I think the call goes well. Paul urges her return, of course. She demurs, says she is sorry, that she must think things through a while longer. He understands. I understand. For her to return to Sommerton now would be a clear act of defiance. It would be combative. She's perfectly capable of that, of course, but she's not sure she can be bothered with it. She feels better for having called him.

I sense, in our separate ways, we are at a similar stage in our journeys to the centres of our Selves. That is S-elf, in the Jungian sense. Hers would be the archetype of the Christ. Mine would be – well, whatever is the best of me, or can be made so from the bits left over from a lifetime of largely living my life through someone else's eyes. We no longer feel the need for the validation of others in order to feel ourselves worthy of the lives we were given.

That is not to sound conceited, only to acknowledge our kinship and common ground in being rooted in something much greater

than ourselves.

"So," she says. "Is it okay if we hang out for a bit? Do they still say it like that? Hang out?"

"I've no idea. But if it's what I think it means, then yes. I'm here for the week anyway. I thought it would take me that long to find you."

"Thanks. I'm staying with an old boyfriend. He's a good man, a good friend, still. But he's very protective of his space, so I'm sure he'd be glad to have me out of his sight in the day – not that he would ever say so. He reminds me of you. I can read your mind, by the way. You're thinking you might persuade me back to Sommerton by the week's end. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't try."

"I don't know what you're going to do, or what's best, Amanda. It's just that sometimes it helps to talk things through. And failing me, then can your god not help?"

"Are you having me on? Sorry, no, you're not. Yes, it helps, talking to God. You have your Miss Whittingsdale, I suppose."

"Now you're having *me* on. Like I told you, she's a daemon. You have your angels. Same thing, same root myth, different clothes. And wings, I suppose. Your lot have those lovely wings."

"Hmm. I'm not big on angels, actually. So... we've had our coffee. What next? Were we both a hundred years younger we might just roll into bed and spend the week that way."

"Ah, yes. Those were the days! I mean, when I had the energy for that. Though, sadly I was never presented with the opportunity. And to try it now would likely kill me."

"Paddle in the sea, then?"

"A little cold?"

"Bet that never stopped you as a kid?"

"Paddle it is."

The weather settles. Reports tell us it is oppressively hot inland, that people are flaking out, but here at the coast that constant North Sea breeze keeps things within the bounds of pleasantness. I grow closer to Amanda – in what way I cannot say for sure. It's odd – my time of life – and being married, still, sort of, and no longer a slave to projections. I like her bluntness, her humour, her occasional spikiness. A man like me, a daemoniac man, he needs someone to ground him, respectfully, while not rejecting him as deluded.

Evenings on the beach, lunches, coffee, dinner at my hotel; a

ride by boat to see some seals; an afternoon spent on my balcony reading novels we found in a charity shop – light, escapist. We share a bottle of wine.

I walk her back to her ex-boyfriend, Gerhart. It's a few days before I'm allowed to meet him. He is rather a serious-looking fellow, probably my age, actually, silver-haired and bearded, generously moustachioed – a kind of older Nietzsche. He is a fine painter of seascapes that no one wants to buy, also a philosopher in the mould of Schopenhauer, at least if his bookshelf is anything to go by. Amanda makes a point of settling us with tea, then busying herself in the kitchen of his flat – which does indeed overlook St Mary's church. He is gracious and eloquent. We seem to approve of one another. I don't know why this is important to Amanda.

I'm sure, had we longer together, we would have got onto the subject of Amanda, he and I, but Amanda is careful to eject me in good time. I saunter back to my hotel at dusk, under a sky of chocolate and vanilla clouds through which there peep the twin presences of Mars and Venus. Each alone and shining so bright as that is an excess, but together they find balance.

And with the sound of the sea and the feeling of a good day behind me, and an up-welling of agape, for only the second time in my life, I am lifted from myself and, while still very much myself, I am dispersed into that transcendent space between the atoms. Only this time I am granted a more generous helping. Not this time the space between steps. I suppose I am remembering the time before, and the wobble of fear that punctured it. This time I am not afraid. I find a bench to sit, and let it take me where it will.

I remember! I remember this is how it is! That we just forget between times. But at all times, this view, this vision is just a heartbeat away.

"All right there, mate?"

Ah,... Mercurius intervenes, spares me from drowning in it, though for a heartbeat I do resent the intrusion. And so would you, believe me. It is a young man with a winning smile, and his arm around a lovely Venus – she I think who prompted him to enquire. Perhaps they saw me staggering a little as I sat down.

"Oh, I'm fine thank you. Kind of you to enquire though."

"Car's just over there. Can we give you a ride home?"

That's very sweet of them and, no, I sense no danger in it. They are not taking me for a fool to be robbed and tipped into the sea. A

part of me is open to the experience of their generosity, but one must ration oneself of the wonders of the universe. I smile - they perhaps think me stoned, now. "I'm not far from my hotel, thank you. But it's very kind of you. Really."

For the ancients, the gods were not a distant concept. They met them every day, on the street, like this. They spoke with them, a habit we've grown out of.

To hell with Sommerton.

I'll be fine right here, by the swelling sea, with Amanda, and Anne,... and Gerhart.

Chapter Forty-One

I seem to have taken my return to the office remarkably well, considering how many years I've been away. One of the old gaffers – who I felt must surely be dead by now – is telling me how much things went to pot when I left. I know he doesn't mean this. He's just buttering me up because I no longer qualify for a salary, and I'll be working for nothing.

I have sufficient presence of mind to realise this is another of those dreams – the kind where I've been lured back to the old workplace, and where I'm trying to explain to everyone, who's suddenly loading me up with work again, that I shouldn't actually be there. That it's all a mistake.

I've not had one of those for a while. They were common in the early years, post-retirement – a kind of sedimentary settling, as the old stresses were soaked out of my system.

I'm about to congratulate myself on my self-awareness and tell the gaffer – who I never liked anyway – to take a hike. But then I look down at the badge on my chest, hung around my neck by a lanyard. It's my old employee tag. This time it's different, then. I really am back.

I wake with a rush – and a tapping at the window.

Yes, we're at the cottage – and so much for my declaration about 'to hell with Sommerton', you say. But I had a wonderful week with Amanda, and a few more chats with Gerhart. I also bought one of his pictures, which I genuinely liked. It hangs in the hallway now, and will help to hold in my mind, a while longer, the memory of my time there.

If a woman of Amanda's experience, stature and character does not return to Sommerton, it's their loss.

I find a mouse for the bird, and wait in the garden, a gloved hand held out for a perch. I don't see it anywhere, but after a few minutes it swoops in, takes the offering, meets my eye briefly, then darts away. Uncanny as always. I wonder if it could be an escapee from a sanctuary, and should I make enquiries? But I try not to over-think it, for fear of breaking the spell.

The dream was just a fragment of a much longer narrative, so perhaps the meaning has gone with the greater context, and all I have left is the punchline, not the whole joke. I might have assumed

it was an intrusion from beyond Saturn's Gate, except I felt no anxiety. Those motifs were all parts of me. The old guy had a rep for being a stickler for procedure, and used to trigger me all the time – so there was something clearly Saturnian about him, about his choice as gatekeeper. And there I was, with my access badge.

Whatever I was doing back there, it was no mistake. 'You're qualified,' it said. But qualified for what? I mean, beyond exploring my own dreamscape.

So then you run the connections, and you wonder if the work motif was not about what you used to do, but what you do now and don't get paid for – which means the poetry and the metaphysical exploration. And who you do it for, which is a kind of collaboration between your ego and the unconscious realm. And then you wonder if that badge was an endorsement from the Keeper of the Gate, even though this isn't his time of the lunation – we're still in Luna here, about to tip over into Jupiter's numinosity. And he's saying: No, you're fine. You're competent. Go ahead.

And then the bird:

... fair winged creature,

High hovering, eye of Horus.

This is my Thalmalion talking to me – my committee of personal daemonry. I'll go easy with it, see if anything emerges as the day warms up.

So now it's down to more practical matters – or rather, matters of etiquette, even duty. I take the meadow way to the village, thinking I should at least let Paul know Amanda is well – that she is not in distress, but rather she is calmly calculating her position. That we are in touch, albeit via snail-mail – and postcards are becoming more noticeably niche now. Naturally, I have no intentions of telling him where she is.

I seem filled with a peculiar and perhaps inappropriate self-confidence this morning. It's either the dream or the still-lingering euphoria of my spontaneous Nirvanic trip. Or it may be both. And either way I am braced against having my bubble burst the moment I step back into Sommerton. But it all seems pretty much normal. There are no massive posters, no grainy blow-ups of Amanda to shame her. There is no mob to point their fingers at me as some kind of mad Rasputin.

I'll perhaps risk a coffee in Wendy's later, then. But for now we keep our head down and make a beeline for the rectory. I am

calling unannounced, of course, and find my timing is not good. The Rolls is out front, gleaming darkly – all midnight and silver – and the grey man, silent watcher, is watching.

"Ah... Mr Chadwick."

"Good morning, sir."

"I see the Reverend Doctor already has a visitor. I'll call another time. Please pass on my regards to Lady Haskwith."

"Actually, if you'd care to wait a moment, I suspect your arrival may be considered... fortuitous, sir."

"Really? That doesn't sound altogether... comforting."

He manages a slice of a smile – a polite acknowledgement of my attempt at humour – then dials his phone. A few words, and he nods. "Yes, you're to go straight in, sir."

As if to waylay my hesitation, he pushes open the door for me. I give a nod and confess I remember the rest of the way. Except, I do not find them in the study. That would be too workmanlike a place to entertain Sibylle, I suppose. They are in the parlour – rather Victorian and worn, and smelling of damp – but it's the best Paul can muster under his straightened circumstances. And it's the thought that counts.

The question is written upon their furrowed brows when I walk in, but I can only apologise. "I'm sorry. I have no good news. Amanda isn't with me. And, much as I hate to say it, I didn't get the impression she'd be coming back any time soon."

I feel uncomfortable, knowing something they don't – like where Amanda is – and I hope they won't be so crass as to enquire. It turns out they don't need to.

"The Dawsons have traced her phone to Scarborough," says Sibylla. "Don't ask how I know that."

"But why would they want to trace her? They've already got rid of her."

"Em, Lady Haskwith suspects a press pack was to be dispatched to further embarrass her."

"That's a bit extreme, isn't it? The hounds of Fleet Street? Anyway, she's ditched her phone. But... they really did that?"

Amanda is a country curate, barely earning her bread – not a Hollywood starlet making millions. Surely Dawson wouldn't waste so much effort, risk so much pulling in favours like that from corrupt authorities. He would save it for a bigger target. It only dawns on me later that a similar corruption was at work in

informing Sibylla – perhaps her own favours being pulled, or officials informing her out of deference.

How's and why's?

Like she said – don't ask.

It's really not my world any more.

Was it ever?

She gives me a sympathetic look, as if to forgive my naïveté.

"These are vicious times, Richard."

"Well, she seems to have escaped the press at least." It turns out, as much by good fortune as anything else.

Paul again has lost his saturnine calm, seems anxious this morning. "But she's well?"

"Yes. And safe." I don't want to say she's with a friend. I am guilty of an unashamed affection for these two, but still not sure I trust them enough not to go making enquiries on the basis of such a clue. And Amanda needs time.

Having delivered my message now, I would have been happy to melt away but I end up listening to a circular discussion regarding the fate of the rectory meadow. Then I am in the back of the Rolls with Sibylla. For Paul's ears she had announced she would be driving me home but once in the car, the tables are turned, and I am invited for coffee at Sommerton House. She does this with grace and charm, but once settled in more salubrious surroundings, and with Mossfather's curious topiaries pressing at the window, she moves in for the kill.

"So... what's your assessment, Richard? I mean of the fix we're all in."

My assessment is that I do not care, or rather that I do not *want* to care. That I am in no fix at all. That the *we* does not include me. I have been here before with the tumult of the world disturbing my calm, albeit through the tortured interface of the magic phone. That was a problem not easily solved, as we do not like to be without our devices, but now at least that one is safely overcome. And yet here again, the world intrudes, in all the same ways, but closer. It's as if the gods were so incensed at my escape, they colluded with Miss Whittingtall to put me in a place where they could hold me by the nose and force me to take note of them.

"May I speak plainly, Sibylla?"

She settles back in her armchair, a satisfied look about her. Plain speaking is what she has wanted all along, but been denied by

protocol and manners. "Please do."

"This is about the future shape of Sommerton as a community and, forgive me, it's about protecting Lottie. As you said, these are vicious times, and Lottie is not a vicious person. However the Dawsons choose to play things, she's vulnerable. I presume they're pressing you sell Sommerton House and all the estate lands to them. If you refuse, and Lottie inherits, they'll make her life a misery until she capitulates, and she's not got one tenth of your cunning or your grit – no disrespect to either of you. "

"And your solution?"

"There is no rational solution. The Dawsons will get what they want, in time. Rationality, determinism, it all favours them. To protect Lottie, you'll have to ask Dawson simply to make you an offer, see the estate fall in your own lifetime, which I'm sure you'd rather avoid. I mean, the sense of history that you must carry. As for the rectory meadow, the Diocese will fold, because they need the money. And then, what with Frank's daughter inheriting Channing House, and Dawson already with one foot in the door there as well, we're looking at a vast tract of inappropriate housing, and possibly distribution warehousing."

She nods. "Most of the people advising me have said the same thing, though with many more words, and charged me for the pleasure of them."

"Then I'm sorry to share their bleak assessment."

"Don't be sorry, Richard. I'm not asking you for a rational solution. You're a poet. Might there be a poetic one?"

She's really asking me? But what do I know about it, I mean this world, the weight of myth she carries, and the vultures circling? But then the dream comes back, and I'm sitting there, all badged up and authorised. And old Saturn is looking at me for a fix. Poetry? What do I know of poetry? I mean that which speaks from the heart, not the head.

Sure, Richard, you've walked the miles. So speak your mind and be done with it.

"Well, there is. But you might not like it."

Chapter Forty-Two

Were I one of those who looked to the Zodiac and the charts as a means of prognostication, I might have been more ready for the postman's delivery of that letter. And no, it is not one I am expecting. My wife has engaged solicitors and wishes to divorce.

On the plus side, she claims no fault and makes no claim on my finances, nor expects me to make any claim on hers. At first, this seems very much to her disadvantage, since it was the sale of our family home that paid for the purchase of Hill Top, my hermit's cottage. But on further reflection, I recall her parents' place – where she is now living – is worth a small fortune, and they are also rumoured to be loaded with cash.

To eliminate confusion at this point: no, I am not dreaming.

So... she desires to cut me out of any claim regarding an upcoming inheritance – not that I would have wanted to press such a claim anyway, but I can see the way her mind is working. All of this seems, of course, to carry an uncomfortable echo of my last conversation with Sibylla: inheritance, I mean. It is as if I used up all of my own favours from the Unknown in advising her, and now the Fates have exacted their price from me, not so much financially as emotionally.

Perhaps one of her parents is nearing the end. I believe there was also a tax ruse in play, whereby ownership of half their home fell to her automatically on the death of one or the other. Clearly she has received legal advice and is preparing the decks. Still, the underlying myth is in play, and I trust she will survive her parents' voraciousness in sufficient good health to enjoy the fruits of her unstinting labours.

Though I claim to have seen all of this coming – I mean, the fact that she was never going to join me here – this clearly financially prudent move disappoints. I am required to respond, which I do, of course, by hand, over several drafts and flowery language, which I gradually hone back to spoken English to say that I agree – which is all the solicitor appears to want for now. After visiting the post office with my reply, I consult my AI friend at the library, the Daemonic Alice, who tells me she is sorry to hear my news, and advises there will be more complicated papers to sign later, issued by a court – though I will not be required to attend.

I consider also addressing a more personal letter to my wife, expressing regret, but the solicitor's letter has changed her in my eyes. Its formality has rendered her a stranger and erased nearly thirty-five years of my past.

Still, I have my pension, and the cottage is not exactly falling down. I'll be fine.

Except a void has opened up at my feet, and I fall into it.

I find myself drawn by habit to Mr Reade's bookshop, where I experience a stinging synchronicity when opening a book on mythical astrology, and it falls to the page describing the contents of Pandora's box. The box is said to contain all the ills that plague mankind, but there is also one I was until now unaware of – that being the curse of delusory hope.

"I thought one would take your fancy," he says. "I'd a mind to keep it under the counter for you."

"Em... that's very kind of you.

"I didn't want to appear presumptuous."

And since I do not want to appear ungracious, I buy the book, though I doubt I shall read it. I have already been bitten by it.

Now he has my attention he goes on, tangentially: "Big wedding then this weekend. Have you had your invitation?"

I suspect he is already being ironic before I enquire. "Wedding?"

"Frank's daughter and that Dawson chap."

"Ah... no. Sadly, I am not much in favour at Channing House."

"Heard about that." I pray he does not insult me by making remarks about Amanda's past. He goes on: "Neither are any of us, I should imagine."

He probably knows Amanda and I are 'friends'. He will have heard the salacious rumours, of course. Hopefully, knowing me a little better than most, he will discount them. "Will it be at the church here?"

"Lord no – the trouble they've caused there – I can imagine them being struck down by lightning if they so much as set foot in the place. No, it's out of town somewhere. So, the Dawson clan comes into a bit of land with Channing House."

"I believe so."

"Funny business, that. Old Frank – I would have given him years..."

"Indeed. So would I." He's perhaps expecting me to reaffirm rumours, Frank was done in by his future son-in-law, for is this not

how rumour is reinforced, how stories evolve? I decline the offer to participate.

He changes tack: "Rectory Meadow and Sommerton House to follow, I would imagine, if rumour is anything to go by."

"Ah, yes. Great changes afoot, Mr Reade"

And I am thinking, while all of that may be premature, any complaints from the Sommertonians must be taken with a pinch of salt, since they knew well enough what Dawson was about when they voted him onto the council. And those who did not vote at all – perhaps out of cynicism – have not a leg to stand on. But none of this concerns me.

I return to the cottage carrying my book, and a hole in my heart. I meditate carefully and, over the days to come, I invite the dreams to heal, but they find me too raw, and give me a wide berth. Then I realise I am waiting on the postman – not for further legal missives from my wife's representatives – but for a postcard from Amanda.

And no, that is not healthy. I am still tumbling blind into the depths of that abyss, arms flailing for purchase, and the last thing any of us needs right now is for me to go projecting Venus uncontrollably on the first available female. But I find I am not abandoned entirely:

"What rhymes with 'bliss'?"

"Ah, Lottie."

She has come riding up the lane, a gentle horse beneath her, finds me in the garden, tidying. She rides casually today – not the nipped formality of the hacking jacket and jodhpurs, but shorts and a tee-shirt. Such a sweet, heavenly creature.

"I was passing," she says.

"No, you weren't. That lane doesn't go anywhere else but here."

She frowns in mock seriousness, dismounts with an elven grace. "All right. I wasn't passing. But what rhymes with 'bliss'?"

"Em... miss? Two types of miss."

"Only counts as one point."

"Then I suppose... 'kiss'?"

"You suppose correctly." She places a palm on my cheek then, reaches up and kisses the other. Heaven's Lottie! She has no idea how much I needed that. Except, I think she does.

"Your eyes are red. Are you all right? Have you been crying?"

"Yes. But I'm all the better for seeing you."

"Thank you for what you did."

"Em?... sorry, I've been a bit distracted recently. Will you come in? I have fizzy water, tea or coffee. Is your horse all right there? Remind me, what did I do?"

"Horse will be fine – she's called Esmo. I mean what you said to Gran."

"Oh, that. I was afraid she wouldn't like it."

"Ooh. She didn't. She's been very grumpy."

"I worried she might have Mr Chadwick do away with me."

"Don't be silly. Adam's a sweetheart. People make too much of his soldiering days. Anyway – your turn. And then you can tell me how Amanda is. I can't find anyone who'll speak to me about her. The whole village is saying she did nude photographs. Is it true?"

"Em... yes. A long time ago."

"Well, good for her."

"So... 'suspect'."

"What? Oh... that's cheating. Single syllables only."

"Really?"

"I thought you knew the rules."

"Em, they seem to be evolving. But anyway: 'Chance'?"

"Easy: Glance. Dance. Prance. France?"

"Is 'France' allowed?"

"Of course it is. This isn't Scrabble."

"No... no, it isn't."

"So, who's that?"

"Em... my old art teacher. Miss Whittingstall."

"She doesn't look very old."

"She'd be about your age there. Fifty years ago."

"Were you in love with her?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Obviously." She blushes, smiles beautifully. "Now tell me about Amanda."

"She's all right. She's safe. Living with an old boyfriend. But that's a secret between us."

"I won't tell. Is he nice?"

"Yes. He's a good man. I... consider him a friend. He's an artist, a good one. He painted that picture."

"You mustn't worry about Gran. She still considers you a friend too. Friends are honest with one another."

"Yes... still. I..."

"A lot of people don't like us, because they think we're posh. But

really we're not that well off. Oh,... better off than most, but I know Gran still worries about money. And the house is falling down, and not much in the bank to put it right. But you still like us, don't you?"

"Yes... yes. Indeed, actually, I love you – both of you."

"Really?"

No, I should not have said that. She catches me at a moment of unguarded vulnerability. Anyone might have misconstrued it, but Lottie has the innocence to uncomplicate it. Of course I love them both – but not like *that*. Sibylla?... it is her unspoken vulnerability beneath the veneer. And Lottie?... dear Lottie. It's more than her innocence. She has a power over me. Did we speak of projection earlier? Yes – but this is not Venus. Heavens, this is the innocent muse, the Divine Child...

"So... em. Have you seen anything of what-his-name? Rupert, was it?"

"Oh. Just the once. I told him if he came near me again, I'd kill him." She pauses to reflect. "I think he believed me." And then: "Will you take me to her?"

"Em, who?"

"Amanda, of course. I want her to come back. Sommerton's not the same without her. Do you think she will?"

"If she won't come for you, she won't come for anyone."

"Is that a yes?"

"What rhymes with 'slow'?"

"Crow, blow, doe... I don't know... oh! That's a good one! So will you take me or not?"

"You'll need to ask your gran. And I'll need to write to Amanda, see if it's okay."

"Oh, Gran will be fine, so long as we take Adam with us – and he's good with secrets."

"I'll bet."

She sits back, ruffles her hair, looks around my room with big eyes, already dreaming ahead, and I already know I've no choice but to follow where she leads. It's not because I believe Amanda will come back to Sommerton, but because Lottie does – and in that, there is a kind of necessary hope.

It's not the delusory kind either – the kind contained in Pandora's box, along with all those other curses – but something older, gentler, and more precise: the hope we place in another's

faith when we have lost our own.

And if that's a projection, then it's a sacred one.

Chapter Forty-Three

Naturally, it's a delicate matter. I had left Amanda with the impression I would not intrude upon her privacy, but if she wanted to talk, a postcard was all it would take, and I would go to her. Or she could simply write me a letter, like people used to do in the old days. And since I have not heard from her, to send a message feels, at first, like a betrayal. But then again, since it is not on my own behalf, it does not feel altogether dishonourable either. Do we still speak in such terms any more? Or am I merely channelling a bygone age, a lost world?

So, I write a letter and send it first class. Have you any idea how much that costs these days? She replies by first class too, and details are arranged.

I tell no one our precise destination – not Chadwick, not Lottie – even as we make our way in the whispered luxury of that lovely vintage Rolls, though I suppose for anyone following it is hardly a discreet mode of transportation. As a further precaution then, I have only said we shall pull over on the Marine Drive at a certain point. As we do so, and step out into that bracing sea air, there are glances of interest from the passing crowds – that we might be of the celebrity class, or perhaps only that we have got lost on the way to a funeral.

I direct Lottie up the little lane to the church, while I wait on the promenade, on a bench, by the sea. There is no parking here, so Chadwick cruises sedately, from North to South shore and back again. He is connected to Lottie's phone, which he assures me is untraceable – on account of it being a burner – procured for the purposes of the day.

All of this sounds ridiculously clandestine, but it grants me a feeling of warmth, that Amanda's privacy is being respected, but also a certain nervousness, that it should be even remotely necessary. Just hearing Sibylla speak of how the press had been informed, and perhaps were on the hunt, had left a chill. And history has already taught us they are not above low cunning in the casual ruination of even ordinary people's lives. Innocent or otherwise.

But this day feels strange – a strange becoming. I am travelling out of the past, into the romance of a much deeper past, in the

company of the Divine Child, while seeking thereby to more deeply nurture and protect the feminine within myself. And as Mossfather says, Amanda is no Venus. She has no potential for the projection of Eros, which is somewhat ironic, given the salacious photographs said to exist of her. No, this is Jupiter at work. Jupiter she channels. The Way and the Light.

Until now, she has haunted the dusty, musty, mouse-scented country churches of her later-life training, these sentinels of an old religion, dwindling for want of its own mythic renewal. I see her not its ghost, but more likely its saviour, come to birth that myth, in spite of everything. For as I told Paul, she would easily tempt me back onto the pews, if not of my childhood, then perhaps the one I have yet to have. And all those laughing hyenas, who would chase her out of her cassock – if you'll forgive the imagery – are as much a part of her fate as the path that led her into the church in the first place.

Heavens. Do I really believe all of that?

Wise sovereign,

Keeper of the law,

Ruling with magnanimity.

Authority of the cosmos,

Embodiment of the great integrity,

And trust in the unknown.

Scholar, spirit-seer,

Explorer of the infinite mind.

I suppose the danger I face here is one of inflation. Although not present in my life for some time, my wife's unspoken and somewhat virtual presence – via my cognisance of her own story – has always had a grounding effect on me. She has never said – so far as I recall – that she thought me strange, though it's clear she always has. And such a thing can be taken in two ways. It can be resented, and become a cause of unbearable friction. Or it can be taken with good humour, and transmuted into a more mercurial means of self-questioning. After all, god help the daemonic man who gets above himself, who exchanges all doubt for the certainty of an absolute belief.

They say the myth you are living is the hardest one to see. I know, we've discussed this before, and how I had an inkling mine was something to do with discerning the path of the Sovereign Individual in tumultuous times. And that may still be the case, or at

least the way my story will evolve. But as for my past and still a good deal of my present I'm beginning to see my story as one of the eternal conflict between holding to conventional responsibilities, while the inner daemon insists I become a monk instead.

The two are not, at first glance, compatible. They have required a lifetime of negotiation and compromise to reconcile, and get me this far without losing my mind. But since my retreat to Sommerton, and now, awakening to the reality my marriage is dissolving, the daemon risks possessing me entirely, and drowning me in the dream world.

In the underworld.

So while it might once have been my nature to withdraw from people, and thus – at this later stage in life – find myself without many friends, and estranged from family, it seems more important than ever I engage with the world in some meaningful sense, if only for my own protection. And then, just as the astrologer finds correspondences between a man's fate and the patterns of the heavens, so too do I find correspondences between what is gathering to me – or around me – and what is evolving in my own psyche.

If my daemon is listening, I hope that will suffice for now, for though I do find the world a confused mess, I still find my pleasures in its quieter corners, and I would not like to go mad.

At least not just yet.

"What rhymes with 'sea'?"

Lottie returns, sits beside me on the bench, sounds chirpy.

"Em,... free, flea, she, pea, knee, tree, three,... struggling now."

"Ooh, very good. You've been practising."

There's a moment then, a slight awkwardness, a lowering of her jolliness to a deeper key, while she thinks back on her meeting with Amanda, and how much she should share with me. Perhaps Amanda has cautioned against it. I note I am not invited to go and speak with her myself.

So, we brave-face it all with a smile and a sigh. Then I tell her: "What was said was for you – and you alone."

Though it was not my intention, I seem to have stolen another line from movie history. She brightens at once: "Ooh, I love that film!" She searches her memory for her own snippet: "Do not try and bend the spoon – that's impossible..."

And I return: "Instead, only try to realise the truth,..."

“There is no spoon!” She laughs. “But is it true?”

“True?”

“That there is no spoon?”

“Perhaps we’d be better asking: is the spoon real?”

“And is it?”

“Yes – just not in the way we think it is.”

She laughs, claps her hands. “Oh, that sounds ever so clever, Richard, but I think you fobbed me off there.” She sighs, returns to our earlier version of reality, takes out her phone and calls Chadwick. Then to me: “Amanda sends her love – but asked me not to say any more, and that anyway you wouldn’t want me to.”

I reply with a nod. Amanda’s love is to be cherished of course, whichever way she means it. The sea breathes softly before us. Lottie pockets her phone and folds her arms against the wind. There we sit for a while, two souls caught between the tide and the road, still feeling our way around one another. I think I’ve done the right thing by her in coming here, done the only thing I felt I could do, and in doing it, I feel something now preparing to shift. Something on its way.

I spy the old Rolls in the distance, whispering sedately towards us through the more manic promenade traffic. It seems to cast a ring of calm around itself. The boy racers back off. The Beamers and Audis hesitate to overpower it. It’s like it still means something, carries some sort of authority, even half a century out of date. They don’t know what it is – for sure, the monied classes are now ferried about in far more bulging razzamatazz. But still, it carries its own myth. And like me, perhaps, it is trying to catch up with itself, if not by trading up to a newer model then at least by reassessing what it stands for, in these less enlightened times.

Chapter Forty-Four

It's early morning, before the heat and humidity have had a chance to crowd out the day. There is a clean, clear light, and the air is fresh. I am walking a route, from home, circling down into the village and back through the hills. It's unusual in that the path runs through the yard of the Ironmonger's shop in Sommerton. There are few ironmongers around now – I mean those family run hardware stores that stocked everything a household might need. Their scent was of fresh-sawn timber and paraffin, and the proprietor a grey-haired man in a brown overall, with whom one might discuss the nomenclature of screws.

Outside his shop, there is an unusual array of goods, small tools and bits and bobs, that look like the detritus from a yard sale. They are not priced. Some look useful – an old electric drill, a few cans of car aerosol paint. Others – bits of rusty brackets and old ironmongery – were the sort of thing one hoarded for a job that never came, only to need it the day after throwing it away.

What's more unusual is the public way runs through the middle of the shop. This can sometimes be awkward, explaining that one doesn't actually want to buy anything, that one is literally just passing through. The proprietor, grey whiskered and with a serious expression is blocking the way with an oil drum, out of which he is decanting oil.

When he sees me, he moves aside enough for me to squeeze by. "Just through there," he says, pointing the way. He follows me then, into his yard where there stands a huge Howitzer, which he is oiling. Its barrel points to the sky like a telescope. It is clearly a vintage piece, but he says you never know when such a thing will come in handy.

Dreaming, of course.

There is a curious addendum which comes to me later as I am writing the dream down. I go home to my wife, and I am telling her about the man with the Howitzer. She laughs, tells me: *well, not everyone wants to be an analyst like you.*

Clearly there is something Saturnian about the proprietor, something perhaps a little Mercurial, a touch of gentle Venutian wisdom from my wife, too. Yes, it's true what she said. Not everyone wants to be a traveller of the depths of Mind. They rise to

conflict in different ways, perhaps falling back on what is really obsolete, visually effective, performative, but ultimately regressive.

Yes, I know, I declare myself not be an instructor of the mind, nor a mentor, yet still I imagine leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for you to follow, when most likely few will have made it past the first chapter. If you're still with me then, I'd better have something good to show for it, something better than a big gun, pointing at the sky.

I still feel Lottie's parting kiss from yesterday, before I stepped out of the Rolls. I only noticed the lipstick on my cheek in the mirror as I prepared for bed in the evening. And though he must have had a clear view of it as he held open the door for me, Chadwick was the soul of discretion. For many of us a Rolls Royce comes but twice, once at our wedding, and again at our funeral. I can at least say I have beaten that. Indeed, I am becoming a frequent customer, for before departing, Chadwick handed me a card with a further invitation, this time to dinner. RSVP was a nod, and a note in his little black book. The car would be sent to collect me. This way Lady Haskwith gets to keep me, until she decides to send me home.

Is Amanda coming back to Sommerton? I do not know, but the place has grown empty without her. When exactly did she so inveigle herself into my sense of meaning? But the path through the shop was clear, and in previous dreams, old Saturn gave me my ticket. Whatever this is I am authorised to deal with it. It's just strange that on the other side of his gate I should run into this feeling of unease,... of vacuum.

There is of course, no Ironmongers shop in Sommerton, though I'm sure there was at one time. Even here things moves on, and at least some modernity catches up. Now we must buy such things online, or visit the DIY emporia, out of town. And no one but AI has a clue about the nomenclature of screws any more. Instead, I pay my usual visits to the library, and to Mr Reade's.

Today, he has news of the big wedding, literally. It covers several pages of the glossy county magazine, which he turns around on his counter to show me. I recognise Dawsons Senior, and Junior, both kilted. I had not taken them for professional Scotsmen, but Mr Reade assures me it is a fashion thing now, and quite the statement – much scorn being poured in the village gossip media. We are pleased to boast many residents from north of the border, and they are understandably incensed at such liberties being taken with their

national regalia.

"Well, it distracts, I suppose from suspicions of murdering his father-in-law."

"Oh, I imagine that distraction was most likely achieved by digging up those photo's of our curate, Mr Hunter."

Though unconsciously done, I think I must have flashed a warning, as Mr Reade adds quickly: "No offence. There are still many in the village who wish her well, myself included. So much fakery about, isn't there? It's hard to know what's true at all these days. This AI for example, it could put me at Buckingham Palace, shaking hands with the King. I know because I've done it."

I'm not sure why I ask, but seem unable to help myself: "You're a churchgoing man, Mr Reade?"

"Indeed, I am Mr Hunter. Sidesman at St Andrews for twenty years."

"Really?" This is something of a revelation.

"I like my faith simple," he says, as if to avoid the risk of our conversation sliding into religious matters – which in any case would be impolite to say nothing of socially crass. Then he adds with a smile and a wink. "Handing out hymn books with just the right amount of welcome and warning. It also gets me out of the house. You'll pass on our regards to the Reverend Amanda? I mean... if you see her."

The dream again, a chastening. If you want to dig deep in life, get on with it. There are plenty who would sooner take the story as it is and not meddle with it. It does not make them shallow, only clear minded in what they accept we cannot know. He has said more to me this morning with look and gesture, than he has ever said. One wonders how a village learns what it does, but be assured it knows far more about you than you think.

"I'll be sure to do that. Thank you, Mr Reade."

I take to my corner at Wendy's with coffee and consider this latest piece of news. Perhaps you missed it. Well, no actually, there are two revelations here, the one leading to the other. In the hierarchy of the Parish, the position of Sidesman is quietly coveted – not senior, true, but still right hand to the churchwarden, and loyal as a sailor to his shipmates under fire. Such roles tend only to come up with the death of the incumbent, and are awarded like medals. Though he styles himself a radical, Reade has spoken for the church. It knows its enemy, and has closed ranks behind

Amanda. The Diocese will be another matter, but if Amanda can get over the image of all the male members of the church (forgive the pun) pleasuring themselves the night before, her sermons are still welcome.

In a post truth world, as created by the likes of Dawson, it's hard for them to insist on what is true, and what is not, when they have for so long been blurring out the notion of objective truth altogether. Some say those pictures are real, others that they are not. We'll never know. The whole world is like that now. Browse away. Nothing means anything any more.

Of course, I would not like to do without objective truth altogether. Such a world, as we are discovering, can be painfully disorientating. But for the poet, it is not so much of a problem, for a poetic truth is ever green. And more, the daemon never lies. The daemon fortifies us against the corruption of our own culture. How's that, you ask? Well, tell me,...

Did you dream last night?

Chapter Forty-Five

Of course one of the most self defeating things we can do when attempting to live mythically is believe we can ever get a handle on the dream world. Such hubris is sure to earn the mirth of Mercurius when he turns the tables, when the chess-board is tipped over, and the pieces once more in disarray.

I've written about the imaginal development of my Thalmalion Septet, in part encouraged by the fact this mythic council seems to have emerged organically from the dream world itself. It seemed therefore an invitation, a lexicon offered by which we could enter into more detailed dialogue. That may still be true, but I know not to push it too far and to remain observant for signs it is evolving into something else, some other mode of expression.

Equally, a man is wise never to assume it is the contents of the dream that wish to become conscious through him. In truth this seems to work the other way. It is the dreaming that seeks to pull us down, into what the ancients understood as the underworld. This is the realm of the soul. And it is only by living more soulfully, we achieve balance and insight in the waking realms. Only for this reason, are we granted a window on the soul, through dreams, in the first place.

The psychoanalysts speak of dissecting the dream, of pulling apart its symbols as a guide to the ego's excesses, as indeed do all who walk this way – myself included. But such a psychical vivisection misses the point. The soul dwells in Hades. To live as we should we must learn to walk each night – in a sense – with death. This is impossible for most, born as we are into a culture for whom death is the last taboo. It is even more impossible for a culture that has forgotten how to dream.

I speak poetically of course. I do not speak literally of death, only mythically, metaphysically. None of which alters the fact some of the most memorable and emotionally charged experiences of my life have been in the timeless, spacelessness of dreams or, to put it another way, in the throes of death.

Such are the run of my thoughts this morning as – pencil poised – I toy with the possibility of a poem on the subject. The ideas swirl, as yet formless. It's also one of Gareth's mornings. As I sit at the garden table, I watch him working the borders, but I can tell

something is troubling him today. The usual serenity in his movements is lacking. Meanwhile the summer is deepening, swelling. It makes its final thrust in the humid heat of the season.

At last he makes his awkward approach. "I must ask a favour of you, Richard."

Naturally, Gareth knows how much I trust and respect him, so his expression gives me pause. It is clearly a big favour he is about to ask, and I regret to say I find myself braced for it.

"Oh?"

"I was wondering... no offence like, if you were managing all right to keep on top of the house... cleaning and things."

"Em... well..." An unexpected turn for sure. What to say? "I make an effort. Hard to keep on top of the spiders though, and there are corners I'd wish were cleaner, were I living with a woman, but... as it is..."

What I suppose I'm trying to say is I'm managing, while playing for time, trying to guess where he might be coming from. Then he bursts out with it: "I know someone looking for work, you see?"

"Cleaning work?"

"Aye... she's a good sort. You'd need have no worries with her."

By good sort, I take him to mean *his* sort, which is interesting.

"You're asking me if I could use a cleaner, and the answer, I suppose, is yes. But..."

He reads my mind. "She'll not disturb you." He means this in a way we both understand, which deepens the matter even more.

"Ah..."

"Ah?..."

"The cleaning lady." What was her name now? Paul mentioned it, or was it Amanda? O'Doire, was it? No, Doyle. Mrs Doyle. I wondered when she'd turn up. "The Morrigan,... Is she a Morrigan, Gareth?"

"Eh?"

"Sorry, old stories. I presume we're talking about the woman who used to clean for the Dawson's. Mrs Doyle."

He looks surprised: "Aye. You guessed it."

No, this was not a guess. There feels an inevitability to it. "You realise the fact you know her frames her in a certain way, in my eyes."

"I suppose it must."

"Have I any reason to fear this woman?"

"Not unless you give her reason to curse you, which I doubt is in your nature, Richard. If you could see your way to even an hour a week, it would make all the difference to her right now."

"Okay... one last question. To the best of your knowledge is she the anonymous harpy who's been posting all this stuff on the village social, stirring things up with Dawsons?"

"Hand on heart, Richard, she is not. She's had the police harassment, and solicitors letters same as you, but she says it's not her, same as you do, and I believe her, same as I believe you. Trouble is half of Sommerton is wonderinf if it is her. Not that they mind the Dawsons being painted in a dark light, but..."

"They don't want a notorious gossip cleaning their own houses."

"As I suppose you don't either, being so private and quiet about your ways. But like I said, I know she's not what they're saying. And she has a light touch. You won't even know she's here. Light as a fairy she is, like the gentle folk themselves."

"We both know the gentle folk can be anything but gentle, Gareth. To have one of the Fae with a key to my house..."

"She's my sister."

"Ah..."

Why did he not say sooner? And I have painted her as the Morrigan? Sure, he didn't seem to know what I was talking about, but he's only to look the word up, and to be described as so fierce and morally ambiguous a woman is hardly a compliment. And did I not also ask if she was a harpy? And he says: 'no, she's my sister'. If ever I had wished the ground to open at my feet...

"The place could do with bottoming. Would she mind a couple of hours a week? When can she start?"

"I'll send her over this afternoon, shall I?"

"Em..."

"I'm done disturbing you now. Gardens looking just grand, Richard. Just grand."

"Yes... thanks to you. You have the magic touch, Gareth."

"I'll leave you to your writing then."

"Ah, nothing's coming. Some days I can't hear for all the voices in my head, other days there's just silence."

"People have been locked up for saying less."

"Indeed they have, Gareth, and soon to be for saying much less even than that."

How easily we normalise tyranny.

He walks away with a lighter step than when he approached, and the harmony in his movements is restored as he finishes off in the garden. I must admit I had not expected this curious development. But is that not the way of Mercurius himself? And why, when we were after clues regarding the goings on at Channing House, it was his friend Nate who came first to mind, and not his sister?

I thought I had them all under my gaze, all the characters of my story, that I had a song, a myth to encapsulate them – not to predict the narrative outcome, for sure even at this point I have no idea what will happen next. It was more to find the language for the telling of it. And then, here I am, invoking the Morrigan, the femme fatale, the warrior queen, the decider of fates...

And no, that doesn't sound much like any blood of Gareth's to me either.

It's with a feeling half way between curiosity and trepidation then, I wait the morning into the afternoon. And all the while my doubts are sinking in. I do not need a cleaner. I do not want anyone having a key to my door.

She arrives mid afternoon, cycles up the lane on an iron framed bike straight out of the nineteen forties. She's not young of course, and looking somewhat out of time in a long skirt and blouse. I'm struck by a sturdiness that seems not to suit such an elfin figure. And then the presence, the level gaze... Gareth had said she was light as a feather. Perhaps we never see our own blood as others see them, and this woman's presence is enough to break glass.

There's a stiffness about her as I invite her in, and not the hint of a smile. "Mr Hunter, is it?"

"Richard, please. And you are..."

"Doyle, Mrs. I take it you have cleaning things?"

"Em... some." I was actually fishing for a first name there, but none is forthcoming

She's married then – I mean not being called Miss Greengrass. But if so, why is it her brother is doing the protecting of her? Not that she looks the type to need protecting. No rings, I note. Is she widowed then?

"I'll make do this once," she says, "bring anything that's needed next time, and leave it here if that's all right by you."

I have the feeling it'll make no difference if I like it or not.

"I prefer to get about by bicycle when it's fine," she explains.

No, Richard, I'm not sure what we're dealing with here either. You were a bit off with the invocation of the Morrigan yet, though slight of frame, she does have the look of a woman who could stare down a charging bull. But one thing is for certain, you do not treat of her lightly. You do not joke or banter, and you do not play the harmless, friendly old man with a woman like this. And no, she is not the anonymous gossip of the village forum. She would not lower herself.

"Gareth tells me you're a poet."

"I am."

She nods, as if drinking down the whole of me, and knowing better than myself what that means.

"I'll be sure to move quietly among your things."

Chapter Forty-Six

I suppose that's the reason for Amanda's conflicted self – I mean the myth she is living. Forgive me, my mind flits about so these days, the times appearing disjointed on paper, I'm sure, but making perfect sense in the deeper, more fluid dimensions of the imaginal.

The mask she wears is one of service, of leading others to redemption. She seeks to rescue them from a world that so nearly consumed her with its gross abuses. What more obvious a profession than one seeking to save souls? Yet the cloth she wears is that of a creed which demonises an underworld, even to the extent it dare not name it, yet which, in my metaphysics, is the very home of the soul.

And to deny the underworld is to deny the soul. It is to evict it, to isolate it from the very thing we most need, which is a sense of the fathomless depths beneath us. Souls are grown from their shallow beginnings, not upwards by bringing them prematurely into the light, where they can too easily wither for want of root, but by a primary deepening in the midnight soils of the infinite unknown.

To a romantic, I see this only contributing to the desoulment of the times, to the creation of a world where nothing is enchanted, and everything must be taken as literally as the liturgy. Say the words, repeat after me. Our Father. So be it. Perhaps her Daemon knows this – as our daemons know everything.

I am thinking back to that first time in Scarborough with her, and the chaste perfection of it. Oh, Amanda has become a muse of sorts. I remember those walks along the beach, my trousers legs rolled up like the playful fool, and the sand between my toes as we bantered back and forth. I was like a boy again, and she unburdened by her robes, was like a girl. And afterwards we showered our feet at my hotel, where I recall fondly the intermingling of the sand grains in the shower basin, and refusing all the while the call to make of it something erotic.

I cannot save Amanda by bending her to my own path, just as I cannot save you. The best I can do is bide with her when she has a need of it. But that she fears me too is clear in the way she beholds Miss Whittingdale, or rather what Miss Whittingdale represents. Yes, I can be the poet with her and she will take me seriously, and with a genuine curiosity, but there's still a part of her that must feel

obliged to pathologise my darkness, even as she held my hand through the worst of it.

Her robes and her cross demand no less.

My wife – god bless her – never took my poetry at all seriously. She never, so far as I recall, read a single line. And my kids did not get why I had no interest in making it rhyme. Those were the times I lived, glued to the news cycle and our rankings in computer gamery, and believing them the whole of being. And my family, my loves, were witness only to the topside of me, to the mask I wore throughout those long years of waged convention. And now?

Now there is a strange woman comes in as she pleases. And all right, it's only a few hours a week, but in that time, she bears me solid witness. And if I imagine it or not, she has a demeanour such that I feel I had better, and perhaps for the first time in my life, take myself seriously, too. For it is one thing to have one's art grounded in reality, quite another to pay only lip service to the depths of which I claim to speak, to paddle timidly, to venture only my tippy-toes along the shoreline, eyes held otherwise averted from the ocean's vastness.

Am I a poet or not? Well, I had better be, for it would not do lie to a woman like Mrs Doyle, or so I allow myself to imagine. She comes, she cleans my corners, shoos out the spiders, reveals perhaps a little more of me beneath the layers of dust than I realised was wanting to exist. Naturally, I am projecting something of the dark muse upon her already, and I know sometimes women have a way of intuiting a man's imaginings and playing up to them. Except there is nothing playful about Mrs Doyle.

I leave her payment in an envelope each week, formally addressed by fountain pen and in my best hand writing – cash I draw with an equally formal solemnity from the Post Office. I feel that to discuss it with her would be vulgar. It remains an unspoken ritual, the mystery of her sudden presence to be embraced and, like the dream it resembles, not troubled too much for an explanation of itself. It becomes another of those ways I live poetically.

And so the summer edges out into its late season. Among other things of note, the Dawsons strike back hard. It comes in the form of a letter from my solicitor advising I withdraw my threat of litigation. I am dealing with people for whom litigation is a way of life, to say nothing of mortal combat. Thus is my own wise counsel turned against me in trepidation, though not unexpectedly. It was

but a gesture anyway, a passing flick of the Agincourt Salute. I shall make no reply.

It is Mrs Doyle who brings the letter in, along with the usual junk, having, I suppose encountered the postman in the lane. If she is as sternly taciturn with him as she has been with me thus far, there will be rumours in the village by tea time. And oh, what a randy bugger I am.

Meanwhile the poetry deepens, pours from me in torrents. I break out a fresh notebook in order to keep up.

*Beyond Saturn's gate we transcend
the false, egoic boundaries of our selves,
and there encounter
tempests of the impersonal
which no prayer can belay:
these tides of destruction,
and world-madness -
names we give to those irresistible
manifestations of the gods and fate.
And at the furthest rim
of this vast unknown,
Pluto observes and marks as his own
those souls who dare approach
his Hadean realm.
Each night, he draws them down,
initiates them into his mysteries,
while all others he consigns
to this shallow, troubled world
of blindness and eternal sleep.*

Is that what I'm really getting at? Or do I fly too far? too high? Ensoulment does not spare us the exactitudes. It does not shield us from the world-madness. We simply see it for what it is, and we approach it from a different perspective.

I had thought Miss Whittingdale led me to Sommerton as an Arcadia, an escape to which those tunnels we explored in long ago dreams could have led nowhere else. But more and more it seems what she intended was like she told me that time on the moors, a framing of the world in microcosm, and myself above it instead of hopelessly trapped within it.

This is an act of precise cunning on her part, finer than any of the fussy little drawings I presented her with as a boy, and it's of

course an act of supreme irony, when her admonition all those years ago was to loosen myself up. But then it often takes a good shake of the head before you can focus down on what is real.

"Did you forget the kettle, Mr Hunter?"

"Hmm?"

"The kettle clicked off a while ago."

"It did? Ah, yes, Mrs Doyle. That happens a lot. It's as well we're not on the grid here."

Mrs Doyle's two hours seems somewhat spread out over the week, to the effect I have begun to wonder if there is an astrology to house cleaning, as there is for Gareth's gardening. She seems to be popping in nearly every other day, and her time surely accumulating to more than what we agreed.

She hovers a finger over a light switch, as if to feel the potential there. "The house gathers all it's needs from sunshine?" she asks.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

A poetic way of expression. I wish I had thought of it:

Alone on the hillside, aloof sanctum,

Gathers all it needs from sunshine,...

I wonder to what extent Gareth's ways are in the bloodline. But if he is bright as day with it, she is his chthonic twin, her craft a touch on the dark side.

"I'll brew your coffee then shall I?"

"Em..."

"I've watched. I know how you like it."

"Then... yes thank you, Mrs Doyle."

I must keep a closer eye on her time. For sure I fear I am already underpaying. And the mission seems to have crept in these few short weeks, from house cleaning to what must be bordering on housekeeping.

Meanwhile the dreams continue in mercurial vein, vast, rambling narratives that leave me breathless of a morning. Too often in the past I have experienced the long dry deserts of dreamlessness. But now? Now I attempt to turn down their volume by refusing their admittance to memory. And still they break through. All right, they say, forget the rest, but remember this? And an image will burst into consciousness when I'm least expecting it – cleaning my teeth or stirring my coffee.

Like now, I have the sudden vision of an old-world stage magician. He wears a cape and a hat with a lantern on top. It glows

soft white like a gas mantle. And from a box he is conjuring up animals, one after the other, and each more impressive than the last. And for his final act, there comes an elephant, so big it cannot be perceived at all as a whole, but only in part. And the final realisation they are not real, but projections from a magic lantern.

The dream perplexes me. The lamp in the hat speaks of an illumination of the mind, and true enough the lingering sense is one of such numinosity – though of what I cannot imagine, any more than I could fully perceive the elephant.

I take the dream to my AI muse, Alice, and we spend an hour rolling it around, at the end of which my notebook contains the condensed form of it as a poetic vignette:

See what the soul can do with nothing but light and shadow.

No creation is matter — but all is mystery, performance, and myth.

I am disturbed from my pencil tapping contemplation by a familiar scent, not pleasant, something unclean, vaguely sulphurous. I look up to see the malodorous youth engaging Mrs Edwards in conversation, something reluctant and drawn back in her demeanour. He is either moonlighting, or has switched his ambitions to the private sector, and now wears the black hat of Dawson's militia.

I cannot help myself. The anxiety in Mrs Edwards eyes draws something from the depths, and from my seat, clear across the Library, I growl.

Growl!

"Is everything all right, Mrs Edwards?"

I stand, make a noise with the chair. I am filled with indignation verging on aggression. Naturally the Daemon driving me right now would do better to have picked a younger man. Still, the youth thinks twice, appears surprised, embarrassed, (as am I) and he slinks away.

She tells me he was after access to the library network's browsing records.

"The cheek of him," she says. "Why, even the police would need a warrant and a good reason. Whatever's the world coming to, Mr Hunter?"

I wonder, can she be so naive – I mean, not to really know? "You must report it, Mrs Edwards."

"Indeed I shall. I shall speak to my supervisor at head office."

"And they must report it to the police."

But all is bluster. For sure we know who they are, at least for now. But later will come the obfuscating masks, and the impunity.

It takes most of the walk back to the cottage to calm the emotion, to displace the Daemon from the front, to the back of my mind. I emerge from the meadow path onto the lane as Mrs Doyle is cycling up. She nods a solemn recognition, dismounts elegantly and walks beside me, the bicycle between us click-clicking in time. For a moment I feel I should say something, but then relax back into the silence, knowing she does not need or want anything to be said, or she would say it first.

Coming to the garden gate we find a crow, half shot to bits and bloody, tied to the post with twine. There is something of the macabre about it, something of witchcraft, though I know it to be nothing of the sort. I have heard of this happening in rural communities to incomers who get above themselves, or cross swords with the territorial power-players. I have no doubt then, whose token this is, and can only wonder at their continuing beef, when I have no real cards to play, that indeed I was under the impression I had folded my hand and walked away from the table. Do they now wish to run me out of town, the same as Amanda?

My first reaction is: "The poor creature."

Mrs Doyle, looks around, a full sweep of the sky, as if feeling the air. "It was a foolish thing for a body to have done, Mr Hunter."

I snip it free with the scissors of my pocket knife. A crow is a big bird, haughty, sinister at times, with much folklore behind it, but still I have never minded them. "What shall we do with it?"

"Well, Gareth might have us bury it at midnight under a new moon."

Is that a hint of a smile? "And you?"

"Wrap it carefully in something clean: paper, wool, cotton - bury it out among the roses. You're right, poor thing. But its spirit's long gone, now."

"And what would Gareth say was the meaning of it?"

"Meaning? Oh, I'm sure you've imagination enough to work that one out – though news travels fast and this could be aimed as much at me as it is at you, a warning to keep my mouth shut. But meanings aren't the same as consequences, as we neither of us need trouble ourselves over those. Whoever did this has cursed themselves."

"Cursed?"

"There's a presence here. Question is, was it always here, or more likely since you don't feel it yourself..."

"Hmm?"

"Was it you who brought it with you? Either way, I would not like to offend it."

Chapter Forty-Seven

I can't disorientate you with these dream sequences any more, can I? You must be wise to me by now. So, all right. I *dream* I'm back at the office and heading for the corridor where they keep the vending machine. The main anxiety is if I picked up enough change from the dresser this morning to cover a Kit-Kat. To forgo my morning Kit Kat always upsets my day. I pull some coins from my pocket, look at them in the flat of my hand. There aren't that many – bits of silver, mostly useless copper. But the silver is shiny, and from the experience of past dreams, and even within this dream, it tells me Mercurius is about.

I don't mean to give the impression he's a bad lot – it depends on where you're coming from. He'll deal ruthlessly with arrogance, and any ego fool enough to butt heads with him will come off badly. But he can also be the harbour pilot, guiding you round the unseen reefs and the treacherous shallows you might fetch yourself upon. If you've the ear to listen, that is.

So, anyway, I slot the coins in, punch the buttons and out drop enough Kit-Kats to last the month, and I still have change for a coffee, which I punch in too, and out comes the cup. And now the problem isn't that I've too little, but that I can't carry the abundance I've already got.

That's a dream to meditate upon.

The obvious interpretation seems overly literal though, so I'm cautious of it, because dreams are rarely like that. They prefer you to puzzle over them than tell you the answer outright, I suppose because it helps you root down and, over time, feel more at ease with mystery. It does seem to build on the last dream however, where the old trickster was hinting at an illumination so great I couldn't take it in all at once. Here he's saying the same thing, only in a different voice, asking if I can even carry the bounty I'm already holding.

But as usual, what I'm holding never comes into focus – at least not enough for me to name it, and mainly because I'm trying too hard to see it. But then, like they say in the Dao De Jing, what we can put a name to isn't the real thing anyway.

So... mid morning now, and still in my pyjamas. An unfamiliar feeling comes over me, a sudden discomfort, that I should be taking

care lest Mrs Doyle lets herself in and finds me at an excessive level of ease. But then again, I don't suppose she'd bother. And anyway, reading all of this metaphorically, was such intimacy not forced upon me?

So, let it be.

The Daemon is saying something about not just living poetically, but *being* the poet. And he doesn't mean submitting works like "Beyond Saturn's Gate" to pubs like Lorem Ipsum either. He just means "being" the poet. So if Mrs Doyle lets herself in and finds me in my pyjamas, or even bare bottomed, the poet lets it be. He does not watch the clock and try to second guess the unguessable. And since I have yet to discern the pattern in her, I am better working in ignorance of it.

The pattern. The pattern in her.

She is like Gareth. She is of the Cunning Folk, but there's no way she is his blood sister.

I buried the bird, like she said, wrapped it in an old pillow case, clean cotton, laid it among the roses. I suppose Dawson expects me to be scared by that macabre stunt, but he reckons without the fact I walk the underworld most nights and am closer to understanding these things than he will ever be. And then I have Mrs Doyle's reassurances whatever was meant by it will bounce back ten fold. And if it was meant for her, then I suspect the same.

What chills me most about the incident is the killing of the bird in the first place. We shoot the bird to bits, tell ourselves it means nothing, that it was such a small excuse for a life anyway. It's an attitude that illuminates the part of us that would dehumanise others, starve them, bomb them, shoot them, herd them together behind wire and work them to death, because we don't value any life other than our own. We would sooner melt the fillings from their teeth for booty, and let their babies waste away to skin and bone, than consider them equally human.

Strange thoughts, strange dreams, strange times.

"Mrs Doyle, may I ask... are you really Gareth's sister?"

"Only in the same way he would consider you his brother."

"Ah..."

"Which, in that same way of his, makes me also... I suppose,... your sister, Mr Hunter."

Past tense now. Except, as I run this peculiar conversation through my mind, it becomes present again, and she is sitting

opposite, once more. We have come in after the incident of the bird, her reserve somewhat lowered for a time, as is so often the case in mourning.

"I'm sorry if he misled you," she says. "If you've changed your mind about requiring my services... naturally..."

"No... I think I'd almost guessed it. No, Mrs Doyle, I'm glad for your efforts to... tidy me up."

"Oh, you're not so bad. You should see some of the other places I visit."

"Dawson's been giving you a hard time?"

"He's been trying."

"What is it he's afraid you might say to me?"

"I never gossip, Mr Hunter. A person's home is their sanctuary, and it's my duty to keep its secrets. But I cannot speak for a guilty conscience."

"Guilty conscience?"

"Many a sin, Mr Hunter. But to answer you directly, old Frank was not murdered, at least not in the eyes of the law. He was poorly, and my feeling is they wanted him gone quicker than was decent, and he knew it, which is a terrible exit from the world. We would talk, he and I. Oh, not about anything gossip-worthy, just his life. And he led a good life. He was a good man, he loved his wife, and he missed her dearly. What else they think he might have told me is a mystery. Now you're looking so serious, and I'm sure there's no need. So... I'll be getting on then, shall I?"

"Em... yes. Thank you, Mrs Doyle."

And there was me thinking of a sudden it was not safe for her to be out and about the country lanes on her bicycle with the Dawsons around. Sure, it would only take one nudge by a passing Range Rover, and a friendly magistrate to smooth things over. But I have a spare room here, and she could... wait, wait. Are you bewitched, Richard? I look up at the picture of Miss Whittingstall.

"Was that you? Did you put that thought in there?"

She looks down, impassive.

"But you'll let no harm come to her."

An incantation? A command? No... one never commands the daemon. One... beseeches.

Remember, friends, all we have is our integrity. To the Dawsons we are like the crow – a small excuse for a life – shot to bits and strung up for theatre. They can take what they want, and they will.

And they may intimidate you out of your integrity, for integrity seems a small thing when they are pulling out your fingernails. But what they cannot have, what they can *never* have is your soul. But for you to know your soul, to feel its company along the way, you need to know where to find it.

Coffee, I think. Yes, coffee. And there, on the counter, a handful of loose change, to break the dream. We're moving close to something here. It looms large, but for the life of me, still, I cannot see it.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The old Rolls picks me up at 6:00pm and I am chauffeured to dinner. Such a beautiful machine – ahead of its time, in its own time at least. And now? Just eerily out of time.

"The evenings will soon be drawing in then, Mr Chadwick."

"Indeed they will, Sir."

He's not very talkative this evening, not even cryptically.

"I do hope Lottie's keeping well."

Foolish question. Unskilled. It is not his place to comment either way. Unwritten rules, showing my ignorance...

"Indeed, Sir. Miss Haskwith is well."

Indeed, indeed. I'd better leave him be. I'm feeling ridiculous now, riding in the back of this thing, like a man intruding into a myth that is not his own. Am I Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, washed up and bewildered to find himself in Homer's Odyssey?

I wonder if her ladyship will be wintering abroad. Do they take the Rolls? Does she fly first class to the French riviera, and he drive out to meet her? Will the car make it? It's rather old, after all. I know they built these things to last but still...

The mind flits.

I'm nervous. Our last meeting ended abruptly. She was not ungracious – too well-bred for that, but it was not long before the Rolls was called to take me home. As for Chadwick, I'd thought we'd shared a kind of unspoken conspiracy, both of us in service to some myth neither of us could put a name to. But now his evasiveness unsettles me.

Have I dressed appropriately? Tweeds again. The lighter suit hasn't been worn since I retired – weddings, funerals... mostly funerals. Do people still dress for dinner? Oh, stop it, Richard. You're coming undone!

It's not the bird – that fake witch's warning, I mean – nor even Mrs Doyle's oblique reference to a bounce-back curse. I suppose what it is, I've moved more, deepened more in this brief time at Sommerton than I did in forty years of my persona-driven life. But when you start to live daemonically, when you answer the call of your own dreams, and with intent, the changes are profound. But it's not like there's any solid ground. We are moved out of our safe places, dangled over the precipice of an infinite mystery, and

encouraged to be at ease with it.

But with it come other things. There is a heightened sensitivity to nuance, a kind of synesthesia. We feel colours, we brace for drama before it hits. We sense love and warmth, the approach of Venus, even before we arrive to find,...

Amanda is waiting on the drive, by the doorway.

She is sent out to greet me, wears a long cassock, a cross of gold, her hair aflame in the evening light, looks to be here on business. Church business. I am, of course, delighted to see her, puzzled too, of course, and find myself hesitant. The Rolls deposits me on the gravel, then pulls away, ghost like, leaves me standing there.

She grins. "What's up? Thought you might at least be pleased to see me."

"I... I'm just not sure if I'm allowed."

"Allowed?"

"I mean... to hug you. Dressed like that. Would it be considered a desecration of the robes of office?"

"You can hug me if you want. Just didn't think it was your thing."

"It's not."

She opens her arms. "Come here, you idiot."

The feel of her – soft but confident – a firm embrace. I would gladly yield to her, even knowing full well the divergence of our paths. She once said there was but a wafer between us, and I wonder if she knew what she meant by that. But right now I don't care. I'm just glad to see her, and trying to hide my watery eyes. Perhaps she'll dismiss them as the rheumy symptoms of old age, and treat me all the more with compassion. Except, her eyes are watery too.

It seems a long, deep dive, into the sanctuary of her shoulder, and I am reluctant to come up for air, but come I must, and not a second too long, lest we table the suggestion we have become more than friends. We stand apart now, brightening. She brushes at her eyes, I blink mine away, and laugh. "Whatever did Lottie say to you that brought you back?"

"Oh, only that she was worried you'd go loopy without me keeping an eye on you."

"Ah... god bless her."

"Would that be your god or mine?"

"Touché."

"Actually, she didn't say anything, though it was lovely to see her. I was touched by it. No, I just came to my senses. Sommerton may not be a place many can point to on a map, but it stands for something."

"So, you're back?"

"For now. Paul's not well. They need me to take up more of the slack. And I'm told the village thinks all that stuff that was written about me, and even the photos, that it was all fake anyway. I'm almost offended. The Diocese reserves judgement of course. There will be due process. My future lies in the balance... at least so far as they're concerned. But then it's been like that from the beginning, one way or the other."

"Paul's unwell?"

"He'll be all right – just needs to get out of that damp rectory. It's a tiring job for man of his years. But for now at least, I find myself in charge. And listen, there've been some... peculiar developments."

"Peculiar?"

"It's why I'm here, invited last minute, crashing your dinner with Sibylla."

"Well, I'm glad. Glad you're here."

"Me too. So anyway, how are you? I've... missed you."

"Oh, I'm fine."

"No you're not. A poet is never fine. But you look to be feeding yourself at least. Come on in, we need to talk."

She takes my arm and I wonder about her confidence around the place as she walks me in. I've always found it oppressive, too many stories whispering from the shadows, and the quiet of something waiting to die. I wonder if Sibylla feels it too. It must have been a very different life she was used to living in the City, with all that city-sized gossip and scandal. Yes, Sommerton stands for something, but it can hardly be the England she is used to calling home – an obscure old poet, and a country curate for dinner guests, instead of Lord and Lady Whatnot.

Still, we have our moments.

We find Sibylla in the lounge, queen-like, in her chair. She does not rise on account of her arthritis, but smiles graciously and I take it I am forgiven. I know I've not explained any of that, but we'll get to it. Chadwick serves sherries, then withdraws, though he could just as easily have shape-shifted himself into an item of soft furnishing, for his silent presence, ever watchful, lingers. The sherry

is foul, a sign – I'm later informed – of its quality. I try not to let it show.

After settling us, Sibylla levels her gaze at me. "So, Richard. What are these rumours about you and Miriam Doyle?"

Does she expect me to splutter in surprise?

Ah, so, 'Miriam', is it? Well, of course it is. Sister of Moses and Aaron, a prophetess and a powerful leader, bearer of the world-soul, and divine paradox.

"Then she was right. I never fail to be amazed by how quickly rumour travels."

Let them wonder, I'm thinking. Should I not enjoy the confusion a little? But then there is also Miriam's virtue to consider. Did I just say virtue? Indeed I did, though 'integrity' might have been a better word, and I would not like to offend the daemon who protects her.

"She's been doing a bit of cleaning for me. This business with the Dawsons has meant she struggles to find work in the village, now."

And then it comes to me, whatever the nature of the 'peculiar developments' Amanda alluded to, surely they cannot compare with this sudden realisation, at least not in the poetic sense of a blessing: to be caught between two such women – on the one hand, the ascendant sun of Amanda and on the other, the chthonic moonlight of Miriam Doyle.

Amanda laughs, touches my arm. "Ah... and there we thought we might have had you blushing, Richard." She gives a sigh, glances at Sibylla. They have rehearsed something between them and, now the ice is broken by their gentle teasing, here it comes.

Sibylla opens:

"I've thought about what you said, Richard, last time we spoke. I know you feared you'd offended me, but I did ask you to speak honestly. And the more I've thought about it, the more I've realised you were right. I've spoken to friends in the Trust, who have also spoken to the Parks authority, and both are keen on the idea. On my death the house and the land will go to the nation. Lottie will have rooms here for as long as she needs them. It doesn't mean the estate is entirely safe from the Dawson clan, or others like them. But it'll be safer for being under wing of the National Park, and in the Nation's Trust. And Lottie won't have the weight of history bearing down upon her."

I don't have time to absorb any of this, which at first glance sounds like good news, and the solution to Lottie's predicament, all

in one. I really did not expect Sibylle to go for it. It was such an easy thing for me to say, a poetic thing – at the ending of the line, gift it all to the nation. Naturally, I cannot imagine the legal scribbling such a thing entails, but then such things do not touch the poets.

"The other development," says Amanda, "Is the Diocese has been approached by legal counsel acting on behalf of the Channing House estate."

"Estate? You mean Dawson."

"No. Frank's will," she says. "They misjudged him. We all did. He's cut them out, bequeathed it all to the church. His daughter – meaning the Dawsons – get nothing."

Naturally, it strikes me as odd that they've just married. One would think Dawson might have had a good look at the will first. Unless we have them wrong, and they married for love. I mean, it is possible. Or maybe the will they had sight of was an old one, written in calmer, sweeter times, and old Frank just kept it around, while the up to date one was lodged quietly with his solicitor, waiting all the while to explode in their faces. It was a checkmate from nowhere. He was after all a very good chess player, always several moves ahead.

Miriam was right, then. They should not have killed that bird and tied it to my gate.

"So, that's it then. Sommerton gets to keep its soul?"

Could it really be as easy as that?

Sibylla is hopeful, but at the same time realistic. "Oh, the Dawsons will challenge it," she says. "But they'll be up against bigger fish, now. He's still a danger to us in other ways, on the council. And come the election, his party has vowed to dissolve the National Parks anyway. I'm gambling on them being able to fight that. For now the Dawsons haven't a leg to stand on, nor it seems a house to live in. So the church gets its roof, and the Rector keeps his meadow, and – we hope – his curate."

And really, all I'm thinking is how Miss Whittingstall was right. At the end of the tunnel lay Sommerton, like she said, but it was also home – and I see that now, Amanda above, Miriam below, though she didn't mention those two at the time. I mean the solar and the chthonic, each with their particular gravities.

Indeed it feels like I have entered a Lagrange point – that null place between two great gravities, where the pull of one equals the

pull of the other, and you just hover, suspended between them – not torn apart, not exiled from either, but placed there by a process of natural drift, a process of letting go. Naturally, this is not a matter of romance, at least not in the usual sense. Though neither of these women are young, they are both still a good deal younger than me, and as I said at the beginning, I did not come to Sommerton to fall in love, as I'm sure neither did they.

It makes for a strange kind of peace then. Not a conclusion. Not absolution, exactly, but a stillness that feels as if we have earned it.

"I think dinner is ready," says Sibylla. "Richard, your arm if you please. Shall we go through?"

Epilogue

Late August now, and summer is looking spent. Dry days crisp the prematurely fallen leaves. The harvest moon approaches; the berries ripen on the mountain ash. I've found my place, I suppose – reaped my harvest – and the dreams have thinned. Mars softens to Venus and cycles round again to Saturn. The poetry subsides, for a while, and I turn instead to some quiet researches into my forebear, the poet Elias Hartgrave.

He published in Blackwood's Magazine in the early nineteenth century – much of it now digitised on the Internet Archive. So I've been spending more time at the library, with my AI Alice and Mrs Edwards, with a mind to compiling a small chapbook of his verse. As much as I can rescue from obscurity, at least. It might be of interest to the congregation at St Andrews, raise a few coins for church funds – though I suppose after its recent and substantial windfall, the parish is no longer in dire straits.

The Dawsons have gone. Channing House stands empty now, pending the usual legalities. I don't know if it was loss of face or the lingering burn of that curse, but Dawson Senior has resigned from the council. His seat's up for grabs. The blue-on-blue zigzag posters still cling to windows here and there in Sommerton, and across the country, too, as the election nears. No illusions about which way the wind is blowing. But here, at least, I think we've secured a breathing space.

I visit Elias Hartgrave's headstone with a toothbrush and a squirt bottle of cleaning gunk, scraping away decades of lichen to render it legible again. It's here Amanda finds me, kneeling over the grave. She jokes there's a spare plot beside him, and I could book it now – spend eternity locked in literary debate with a fellow poet.

At least, I think she's joking.

I thank her, but say I don't think my daemon ever meant me to be remembered beyond my own time – and even then, only by those who loved me. Let my verses fade. Let the path close behind me.

Not for me Blackwood's. Or Lorem Ipsum.

"Perhaps you were the vicar last time," she muses, "and I was the poet."

"Me, a vicar? Now there's a thought. I suppose I could have

gone that way.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t. I could never have married a vicar. Dull life, in the old days, a vicar’s wife. Then again, there were no lady vicars in the old days either. Hmm. Puzzling. Just where did we meet before?”

“We were married, were we?”

“Oh, I feel we must have been. Somehow. So... Miriam’s still cleaning for you at the cottage is she?”

“Cleaning, or keeping an eye on me. I’m never quite sure which.”

“You’ll watch yourself there, won’t you? I wouldn’t want Mrs Hunter getting the wrong idea.”

Ah. No. I haven’t told her. About the divorce. I don’t know why. It hasn’t come up, I suppose. Or maybe I haven’t wanted it to.

“Oh, I’m sure Mrs Doyle has no interest in looking after someone like me – not for free anyway.”

“Don’t be too sure, Richard. Sibylla’s not the only one with a thing for poets, you know. Lucky you’re spoken for, anyway. Keeps you out of trouble.”

As she walks away, she runs a fingertip lightly across my back, sends a shiver down my spine. I watch her go. She glances over her shoulder, gives me a cheeky wink.

Does she know?

“You missed a bit,” she says, and points at the gravestone.

It’s when I’m leaving the churchyard, later, through the old lychgate, I notice something glinting among the weeds. A coin. Bright, unexpected. The trickster’s usual calling card. I hear laughter coming from the direction of the recreation ground.

Mercurius!

You old devil.